Haiti’s Food Security Challenges

During the two last decades Haiti has been hit by hurricanes, droughts, floods and a major earthquake. It may seem as though Haiti is condemned to suffer from natural disasters. However, the consequences of such disasters are to a large degree determined by the country’s vulnerability to them. Haiti’s extreme vulnerability to natural disasters is the result of human policies – not least international policies. The situation can therefore be reversed if there is political will.

Brief Points

- The frequency of natural disasters in Haiti has seriously affected food security in the country.
- The lack of food security in Haiti is rooted in economic liberalization from the 1980s and 1990s. This liberalization led to increased export of American rice to Haiti, rice that was sold cheap at the Haitian local market and represented a heavy blow to Haitian peasants.
- The lack of food security has increased political instability in Haiti.
- International actors need to acknowledge the role of – and support – Haitian agriculture in the fight against food insecurity.

Wenche Iren Hauge  Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Food Security and Natural Disasters in Haiti

When Hurricane Matthew, a Category 4 storm with sustained winds of 235 km/h, struck Haiti on 4 October 2016, it caused death and widespread damage not only to persons and buildings, but also to crops, fishing equipment and cattle. Many fields in the south were covered by seawater and debris. Irrigation systems also suffered significant harm and flooding. Storm surge and landslides damaged the beans, rice and sorghum harvest which was due in October. The World Food Program (WFP) reported a harvest loss of almost 100% in the South, with up to 80% harvest loss in some areas of the southeast. The damage to crops is expected to impact food security in affected areas for a considerable amount of time. Hurricane Matthew struck when Haiti had already been through two years of drought. As a result of the prolonged drought and the losses sustained, Haitian peasant farmers did not have the capacity to properly finance their agricultural production for the spring of 2016. Assistance from the Haitian state and from international donors came late and was insufficient (CNSA, 2016, p.1). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported on 21 October 2016 that 800,000 people in Haiti were in urgent need of food assistance (OCHA, 2016).

The effects of Matthew worsened the already critical food security situation in Haiti, which has long been linked to structural factors. Haiti’s main staple food is rice and as much as 80% of the rice consumed in Haiti is imported, mainly from the United States. High food prices have reduced food access for the most vulnerable households in Haiti all throughout 2016. With 53.4% of the population being undernourished, Haiti stands out as a special case (FAO, 2016, p.1). The lack of food security in Haiti has also frequently led to social and political instability. When international rice prices increased strongly in 2007 and 2008, this led to huge street protests in Port-au-Prince. The earthquake in 2010 led to a stream of migrants from Port-au-Prince heading towards rural areas. The number was estimated to around 600,000. As agricultural production in these areas was already low, people in the countryside were not able to help and sustain the migrants, and after only half a year 40% of the migrants had returned to Port-au-Prince.

Historical Causes of Food Insecurity in Haiti

Rice is the main staple food in Haiti. Despite the country’s history with a long period of dictatorships under Francois Duvalier (1957–71) and his son Jean Claude Duvalier (1971–86), Haiti was self-sufficient with rice until the mid-1980s. It was during the late 1980s – with structural adjustment and trade liberalization – that Haiti became increasingly dependent on imported rice.

At the entrance of the 1980s a series of international factors influenced the Haitian economy in a negative direction. Particularly important were: 1) loss of income from the export of coffee; 2) increased oil prices during the 1970s; and 3) high interest rates on external debt. In addition, corruption and economic mismanagement from the Duvalier period had affected the economy.

In 1981 the Haitian government launched a new five-year development plan, calling for an unprecedented USD 1 billion in external economic assistance over the next five years. The plan was heavily criticized by donors as well as by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (DeWind & Kinley III, 1988, p. 55). Because of ‘disappointment’ with the Haitian government’s earlier lack of commitment and efforts to carry out its development plans, the international agencies now took steps that would give them greater influence over planning and implementation of the development programs. In 1981 the World Bank began to prepare a new medium-term economic plan for Haiti for the first meeting of an ad hoc subgroup on Haiti. The plan was presented in an Economic Memorandum in 1982. In the memorandum the World Bank presented the outline of an export-led development strategy for Haiti. The World Bank and USAID identified Haiti’s greatest comparative advantage to be its hard-working and low-cost labor force (World Bank, 1982, p. 40; USAID, 1982b, p. 122). They also identified some other advantages, including Haiti’s potential for diversified agriculture, its climate, which is favorable to year-round cultivation, and its proximity to the United States. The World Bank’s strategy was to exploit Haiti’s comparative advantages by developing the export potential of agro-industry and the assembly industry. In line with this strategy, larger tracts of flat land would be reoriented towards the production of export crops such as fruits and vegetables to be sold at the U.S. winter market. In this process, USAID in total proposed to shift 30% of all cultivated land from food production for local consumption to production of export crops (USAID, 1982a, p. 172).
USAID advisors anticipated that this drastic reorientation of agriculture would cause a decline in income as well as in nutritional status and that it would lead to migration. In 1982, USAID’s Food and Agriculture strategy team predicted that over the next decade migration to Port-au-Prince would continue and bring about a ‘major, perhaps massive shift in population out of agriculture’ (USAID, 1982b, p. 173). However, USAID defended the strategy by arguing that employment and income possibilities would be better in urban areas and that a large migration actually should take place as ‘one of the price mechanisms for moving large segments of a population out of poverty’ (p. 171).

However, in its Country Development Strategy Statement for 1986, USAID admitted that ‘agricultural output was stagnant’ and that ‘industrial growth (which had been quite high in the 1970s) had stalled in the 1980s’ (DeWind & Kinley III, 1988, p. 74). Between 1980 and 1985, real wages in Haiti fell by 9%. GDP per capita and per capita agricultural production also declined. USAID’s strategy to get Haiti’s peasants to abandon food crops in favor of export crop production was to reduce the price paid for food in local markets while increasing the prices that producers receive for export food crops. Through the U.S. Title III food program USAID sold and distributed freely millions of dollars of low-cost foods in the Haitian local market, thus depressing the incomes of peasant producers (DeWind & Kinley III, 1988, pp. 98–100). Many peasants were unable to sustain their families by farming and increasingly migrated to Port-au-Prince and to other cities. This has also resulted in land sales, increasing the concentration of landholdings among the more wealthy farmers and absentee landlords.

**Increased Dependency on Imported Rice**

When Jean-Claude Duvalier fled the country in 1986, the military junta that took over was directed to undertake economic reforms, outlined in a structural adjustment program, designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The adjustment program in particular called for changes in agricultural pricing and trade liberalization (World Bank, 1992). In accordance with the program, all but 7 of 111 quantitative restrictions were eliminated. The remaining products represented less than 20% of imports and became subject to import licensing without formal ceilings. The general level of protection was drastically reduced and the export tax on coffee was phased out.

The U.S. exporters benefited from the new economic policies, especially the removal of control on imports. The value of agricultural exports to Haiti from the United States increased from USD 44 million in 1986 to USD 93 million in 1989. The Haitian economy, on the other hand, remained depressed. Economic growth over 1986–87 averaged slightly less than one percent a year (World Bank, 1992). Food production fell. Minimum wages fell even further, decreasing 45% between 1985 and 1990. The value of exports also dropped due to declines in international prices of coffee.

As the Haitian markets were liberalized and protective tariffs greatly reduced, rice imports from the United States shot up from 7,400 MT in 1980–82 to 74,200 MT in 1986–88 and reached 109,200 MT in 1990 (World Bank, 1998, p.11). This was a heavy blow to the rice farmers in the Artibonite. The peasants in Artibonite experienced the consequences of the rice import already in 1987. The subsidized American rice was sold much cheaper at the Haitian home market than the locally produced rice. This led to strong protests in Artibonite that year. Several peasants were killed by the Haitian military during the protests. It also further increased rural-urban migration.

**Rural-Urban Migration**

Haiti’s low level of agricultural production and its dependency on imported food made it very difficult for the country to handle the food security crises after the earthquake in 2010 and after Hurricane Matthew in 2016. The Haitian government has taken several steps to improve the situation, but has not received sufficient international support.

In May 2010 the Haitian government approved a National Agricultural Investment Plan. The plan estimated the needs for investment support in the agriculture to USD 772 million over seven years. The government committed itself to contribute to 14% of the total. However, donors did little to support the plan. Promises of support for up to 84% of the estimated needs were not followed up. After Hurricane Matthew in October 2016, the Haitian government issued a Red Alert officially requesting UN assistance. The UN then on 10 October launched a Flash Appeal for USD 119 million to respond to Haiti’s most urgent needs. In the flash appeal, the largest amount of money (USD 56 million) was earmarked for food security, nutrition and emergency agriculture. However, most of these funds were for short-term assistance through the...
These policies must not be repeated! Now is the time to invest in Haitian agriculture and also in good living conditions in rural areas. This leads to the following policy recommendations for international actors in Haiti:

- To contribute with economic support for investments in the Haitian agriculture.
- To encourage and support Haitian policy initiatives to subsidize national agricultural production and assist peasants through technical advice.
- To support Haitian policy initiatives to readjust import tariffs for the protection of national agricultural production.
- Buy locally produced food for humanitarian assistance where and when this is possible during emergency operations.

World Food Program (WFP). On the other hand, only USD 9 million was planned to go towards ‘restoration of rural productive capacity’. As can be observed from both the post-earthquake period and the post-hurricane Matthew period, long-term investments in Haitian agriculture are still being neglected.

Recommendations

The experiences from Haiti reveal the need for international actors to think more long-term during short-term emergency operations. Otherwise, a country like Haiti will get stuck in ever recurring food insecurity crises. To achieve improvements it is important to learn from earlier mistakes. The economic liberalization policies that Haiti was pressured to implement by the international financial institutions during the 1980s and 1990s had a devastating effect on Haiti’s agriculture and increased rural-urban migration.


References