



**Global Network
Against Food Crises**
INTEGRATED ACTIONS FOR LASTING SOLUTIONS

FAO–WFP analysis of the links between instability and food insecurity in Haiti

Executive Summary
English version



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Executive summary

Background and objective of the study

Very high levels of food insecurity and political upheavals, together with widespread social unrest and outbreaks of violence, are endemic in Haiti and mutually sustaining. This study was sponsored by the Haitian humanitarian food security sector, with the support of the Global Network Against Food Crises, to better understand the interplay between rural development and food and nutrition insecurity, on the one hand, and recurrent sociopolitical crises on the other. It aims to inform national planning processes and identify the conditions for political engagement with the stakeholders involved in agricultural development and food and nutrition security in Haiti. It is nationwide in scope and covers a variety of considerations, providing context and a starting point for programming that will make provision for the conflicts and focus on specificities with a greater degree of granularity.

Study context

The study was carried out while the country's political, socioeconomic and security situation was deteriorating sharply. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, followed by an earthquake on the southern peninsula in August, had ushered in a period of extraconstitutional governance, with the rise of armed gangs, and acute humanitarian crisis. The food emergency in Haiti is among the ten most serious in the world.

Structural factors of fragility in Haiti

Haiti's chronic protracted crises are attributable to rifts and weaknesses that date back to the early days of the republic. The underlying factors of fragility are deeply embedded in contemporary Haitian society and highly topical. No social contract of the kind that binds citizens to each other and to a legitimate and responsible state has ever been entered into. Haiti remains characterized by strong social stratification, weak governance and insufficient social cohesion at every level. Those persistent conditions for structural violence underpin a fierce competition for resources and status, where coercion and the use of force for political, economic or criminal ends are widespread.

The deepest fault line in Haiti is the opposition between farmers and the urban authorities, which places the agrifood system at the centre of conflicting identities and aspirations. Rural farm workers have long occupied a lower-ranking position. Spatial segregation is a determinant of the sociopolitical order, with the cities, especially Port-au-Prince, having become the places where power and wealth are concentrated.



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Over time, the exploitation and neglect of rural areas has caused a gradual decline in agricultural productivity, which now stands at among the lowest in the world. That has led to a mass migration from the countryside to the informal neighbourhoods of urban areas that represent pockets of extreme vulnerability and, hence, places of conflict and criminality fuelled in part by gang violence.

Haiti remains deeply divided and inequalitarian. According to estimates from the World Bank, the most well-to-do 20 percent of the population owns more than 64 percent of the country's wealth, while the poorest 20 percent have barely 1 percent.¹ A small economic elite controls the strategic economic sectors, including food exports and imports. For the seven million or so people living on USD 2.41 or less per day, life is a struggle for dignity and security. The Haitian Government has been unwilling and unable to provide marginalized populations with protection and basic services. Institutionalized corruption is a drain on public resources and seeps into every trading relationship, fostering opportunistic behaviours and a weakening of social ties. Meanwhile, the local solidarity networks that have long represented a source of resilience in rural society are gradually disintegrating as a result of economic and environmental pressures. A profound lack of legitimacy is the main obstacle to a general agreement that could lift the country out of the current crisis.

Haitians also have an unshakeable feeling of foreign interference in their domestic affairs, to the country's detriment. Many national actors would prefer the international community's role to be less directive. That raises the question of Haiti's heavy dependence on international aid as a result of its persistent instability and serious humanitarian situation. Food aid and business practices are hotly contested in Haiti, fuelling narratives on foreign domination that are undermining the country's quest for self-determination.

1 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/haiti/overview#1>

Links between instability and food systems in Haiti

The agrifood system bears the hallmarks of the conflicts of interest and values inherent to Haiti's continuing fragility, the role of agriculture in its national development trajectory being a fundamental source of tension. The prevailing model of the past few decades has been an outward-looking policy favouring trade in food products and investment in large agribusiness enterprises. That approach, however, has not brought greater gains in terms of livelihoods and food security for the rural and urban poor.

Rapid trade liberalization in the 1990s did not improve access to food: the monopolistic structure of the food trade with respect to imported goods has kept the price of imported staples higher than in the rest of the Latin America and the Caribbean region. At the same time, the already fragile state of agricultural livelihoods in Haiti has deteriorated further, with imports of cheaper – often subsidized – food leading to a reduction in domestic production. While demographic and environmental change may have contributed to the decline in productivity, it is trade policy choices that lie at the heart of grievances linked to injustices in the food system.

Largely self-sufficient in the 1980s, Haiti today is incapable of meeting the domestic demand for food items. The resulting bottomless trade deficit and weak currency have contributed to spiralling food inflation, further aggravated by global supply shocks. Despite significant efforts to promote larger-scale commercial operations and integrate farmers into high value-added supply chains, agricultural produce accounts for just a small share of Haitian exports. The competitiveness of the international market is a drawback, as is the reluctance of farmers to accept changes in land use and crop-growing models, which is a key driver of conflict. Such changes are regarded as carrying the threat of greater dependence between Haitian and the foreign interests mistrusted by farming populations.





Farmers have long survived with the help of informal microproduction and food-barter arrangements placing a premium, first and foremost, on self-reliance and resilience. They regard small-scale farming as a lifestyle with deeply held social and environmental values, in keeping with the food sovereignty model. Resistance to the concentration of control over land, seeds and water and the commercialization of food contribute to their misgivings about, inter alia, the large-scale investment projects promoted by the Haitian Government and a share of the international community. Developed in a context where land tenure governance ensures neither security of tenure nor social and environmental safeguards, those projects are criticized for the travelling and deterioration in livelihoods that is involved.

Generally adverse structural conditions, especially in the Haitian food system, constitute a permanently high risk of conflict and violence. Food-related conflicts are often localized and concern disputes over plots of land or fruit trees, for instance; in emergency situations they are reflected in disruptions in the distribution of food aid. In spite of the absence of systematic monitoring, and even though their impact at the individual level is limited, those localized conflicts are globally considered to occur frequently enough to chill investment, erode social cohesion and diminish food security on an increasingly significant scale.

The conflicts include attacks on, or the appropriation by force of, productive assets such as land and water. Gang violence in urban areas and in the rice-growing Artibonite region directly targets food system infrastructure, such as irrigation canals, markets and warehouses. In 2021, the distribution of food from the countryside to the capital was disrupted by gang warfare and roadblocks on strategic transport routes, damaging livelihoods for farmers and traders and limiting the delivery of aid to vulnerable persons affected by the crisis. The gangs also use food as a tool to recruit new members, including women and children, and to force communities living in desperate economic conditions into submission.

Food insecurity is a powerful symbol of wider grievances about the cost of living in Haiti (lavichè or la vie chère), triggering mass protests that have had major political and economic ramifications over the past few decades. Those upheavals have, in turn, had an impact on the functioning of the food system and on the population's level of food security.

Transform the structural conditions in Haiti's food system: use a national framework to initiate change

There is repeated criticism and disapproval of the place of agriculture and food security in national programmes. The policies appear not to have been properly embedded in an integrated rural development approach, managed at the national level; they are regarded as a reflection of social constructs that exclude and discriminate against rural interests, as well as of the State's disdain for the conditions of the majority of poor citizens. The national policy and strategy for food sovereignty, food security and nutrition in Haiti (PSNSSANH) represents a major step forward and a promising new framework within which to develop a model to make amends for the injustices and strengthen a nascent social contract through interventions in the agrifood sector.



The PSNSSANH policy and strategy seeks to regain the ability to take action, adopting food sovereignty as a core principle and reasserting the value of Haitian assets and traditions. It relies on small-scale family farming and the national food sector to revive the overall economy and stimulate job creation. In addition to a dramatic adjustment to agrifood and investment policies, it is introducing a new, sectoral, style of governance aimed at seeking consensus among the key stakeholders.

The national policy and strategy was approved before the assassination of the president. Its implementation presents some significant challenges in terms of leadership, the political will, stakeholder alignment and the capacity to embrace a transformation of the food system. In the longer term, responsibility for the changes will lie with the Haitians themselves. The support of the international community is nonetheless crucial, not only for its sector-specific technical expertise but also in order to manage conflict and establish extensive consultations on the sensitive issues under consideration.

Development partners could draw on the work under way to design the approaches and actions needed to create momentum for the policy and strategy and restore the national food system to a more equitable footing:

1. Raising awareness among decision makers, other key stakeholders and the general public of the national policy and strategy as a basis upon which to reform the food industry;
2. Mapping and evaluating more fully the stakeholders in order to structure the consultations and maximize their chances of success by, inter alia, classifying the issues, identifying the areas where agreements might be easier to reach and deferring more sensitive sectors until a later stage;
3. Building confidence in the activities of the international community by increasing the provision of local food commodities through aid programmes as a sign of support for Haiti's agriculture-based economy and national interests;
4. Strengthening social cohesion within communities and among food system actors through consultations and the introduction of sustainable income-generating activities at the local level, with genuinely representative management structures and operational networks. Those efforts would also serve to strengthen the local partnerships and knowledge that help to minimize conflict and abuse in post-crisis humanitarian operations. United Nations agencies have a great deal of experience with such local initiatives in Haiti.



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