
Haiti: Avoiding Another Dangerous Delay



Farmer Nessilo Dorestant with crops destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in Les Roseaux, South West Haiti.
Photo: Dalenstry Pierre KPGA/ActionAid

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Introduction

In Haiti, grassroots communities, international partners, and the government are sounding the alarm of an impending food crisis, with potentially disastrous consequences for nearly 2 million Haitians at high risk of hunger. Without immediate and adequate response, we may see headlines in a few months telling us about avoidable deaths in Haiti. If we succeed in responding now, there will be no news to report - except for those who can see the significance of a functioning relief system in evidence, like farmers able to resume planting before the dry season and food markets offering quality food at affordable prices.

The lessons from the 2011 food crisis in East Africa: warnings not adequately heeded

The 2011 food crisis in East Africa, due to drought, was long predicted by well-informed monitors of regional weather and social conditions, but after the crisis struck, there was a general consensus that the warnings had not been adequately heeded. The deaths of tens of thousands in East Africa were caused by a complex set of factors, but many feel that the failure to start responding before the dimensions of the crisis were clear - with “no regrets” measures that will contribute to greater food and livelihood security even if no crisis occurs - was partly to blame.

A report published by an NGO consortium analyzing the response to the East Africa drought was called “A Dangerous Delay: the cost of late response to early warnings in the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa.” It recommended the adoption of a Charter to End Extreme Hunger, a shift to action based on forecasts and probabilities instead of waiting for facts on the ground to become clear (by which time it is often too late for some), and more flexible donor funding allowing for pre-emptive measures and inclusion of “crisis modifiers” to provide for recurring crisis responses in development programming.

Are we going to make the same mistakes in Haiti?

One month after Hurricane Sandy, the situation in Haiti is now analogous to the one in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya before the drought’s peak, and the warning signs of looming hunger are clear: up to 70% of crops in southern Haiti, including staple crops of maize, bananas and plantains that have been destroyed (Ministry of Agriculture, Haiti); livestock

“I saw how vulnerable communities and humanitarian field workers were denied the tools and resources necessary to save lives before it was too late. It was incomprehensible. How come, more than a generation after man walked on the moon, we would let fellow human beings die needlessly because we would not give priority to meeting their most basic human needs in time? That the needless haemorrhage of human lives took place again in the Horn of Africa in 2011, in spite of all our knowledge and all our experience, is an outrage.”

Jan Egeland, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, in the foreword of ‘A Dangerous Delay’

losses nationally are estimated at 64,000 heads; affected populations face risky and unsustainable coping strategies.

Although Sandy also hit other Caribbean countries and the U.S., the threat to lives in Haiti is more serious because the country is the most impoverished in the Western hemisphere, and has recently endured another hurricane (Isaac, in August), a poor harvest for the last growing season, and a cholera epidemic. Haiti is also, of course, still reeling from the massive January 2010 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince and its surrounding areas.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which UN OCHA estimates has affected nearly 2 million Haitians, clear warnings of imminent and widespread food insecurity are emerging in Haiti:

- Hurricane Sandy destroyed up to 70% of crops in parts of Haiti, including staple crops (Ministry of Agriculture, Haiti). In some areas, such as Grande Anse, 80% of the plantain crop was lost, 70% of beans, and 90% of haricots. In addition, livestock losses there were pegged at 65% for poultry and 85% for goats (ActionAid Haiti survey with partner). Nationally, crop losses from the three successive disasters are estimated at \$80 million for the drought, \$70 million for Hurricane Isaac, and \$104 million for Hurricane Sandy. Livestock losses nationally are at about \$3.2 million (Government of Haiti).

“We have lost everything. If I do not find seeds and seedlings now, I will have to prepare them myself from remaining devastated crops. But it will take a year for them to be ready and more than six months after to harvest. There is no possible way for my family to survive this long without food. All the farmers are in the same situation.”

Nessilo Dorestant, farmer from Les Roseaux in South West Haiti

- The situation in at least 92 of the 140 communes in Haiti is considered serious by international partners (FAO). The food insecurity rate could reach 50% (UNICEF). In Grande Anse, there is an estimated 22-day food supply for about 40% of the population (assessment by ActionAid Haiti partner KPGA, 11 November 2012).
- The impacts of Hurricane Sandy are exacerbating existing food insecurity caused by both unusually dry conditions in May-June, which reduced the spring harvest by 40%, and by Hurricane Isaac, which resulted in more than 60% losses in affected areas compared to autumn perennials such as bananas, coffee, fruit trees, and crops sown in August (including corn and beans). Prices for staple foods began to rise in August and September 2012, a trend which is predicted to continue through the end of 2012 (USAID). Between July and November, food prices in Grande Anse have risen 100% for haricots, 33% for corn, and 22% for rice, and the price of most seeds has tripled (assessment by ActionAid Haiti partner KPGA, 11 November 2012). People’s purchasing power is estimated to have declined by at least 50%, creating an additional stress on parents who do not have the means to pay for school and materials (assessment by ActionAid Haiti partner APV in Vallue, Petit Goave, 9 November 2012).

- The Haitian government is trying to take the necessary steps through a three year program with the Ministry of Agriculture to help the agricultural sector recover, but funding is severely lacking (Ministry of Agriculture). As such, the FAO has launched an appeal of USD 74 million for agricultural inputs. The UN and other humanitarian organizations have appealed for more than USD 120 million: the European Union has released EUR 5 million, the US government USD 7.5 million, the UN CERF USD 4 million, but it is not clear whether it is to respond to the imminent crisis (UNOCHA, meeting notes of Humanitarian Country Team of 13 November 2012).

The top priorities now

Urgent relief to Haiti's most vulnerable populations is needed to save lives. ActionAid's experience and in-depth consultations with grassroots communities throughout the country have yielded the following recommendations:

- Cash or food for work schemes should be targeted to the disaster affected communities who are currently without any access to income or livelihood. Projects should be selected by the community and should focus on building their capacity to restore livelihoods. Food should be sourced locally as much as possible to protect farming communities from unfair competition from international markets while monitoring the food need of the farming communities themselves;
- Hygiene and anti-cholera kits should be distributed widely in vulnerable areas, with a special focus on promoting information, education, and communication;
- Food relief should also be provided in schools to target children particularly while ensuring their access to education;
- The government of Haiti should urgently put forward administrative measures to stabilize the price of staple food items (e.g. beans, corn, vegetable oil), while expediting delivery of support to areas in need;
- Urgent and adequate investment to ensure the diversification of livelihood for the people living in poverty and affected by the hurricane, such as finances to restock livestock (including feeding and vaccination services) and capital for starting or rehabilitating micro-enterprises;
- Prioritize the involvement of civil society and their representatives in this process, particularly women, who are usually the worst affected and first respondents, by building leadership capacity and increasing their access to the capital and technical assistance necessary to promote means of livelihood and resiliency;
- Ensure transparency of information on all relief efforts towards the affected population.

Towards recovery, or backwards to deeper crisis

As the next step after relief, the foundation for recovery must be laid immediately, or Haiti risks slipping into a crisis worse than what it faces now. Immediate support, in the form of seeds, agricultural equipment and agriculture finance, is needed to help small scale farmers plant crops in the current and next sowing seasons, as the sowing season varies depending on location. In Grande Anse, for example, the present time through December is the crucial cultivation season for haricots, plantains, malanga, and sweet potato. Corn, manioc, and sweet potato are generally planted in January-February. In Vallue, that season will be January to March, and in Hinche/Juanarya, it will be in April. More specifically, government, donors, and civil society groups must insure that farmers receive:

- Adequate amount of good quality seeds. Even where seeds are currently available, they may be of poor quality and/or being sold at exorbitant prices.
- Distribution of goats and poultry, especially to women. Appropriate breeds for local conditions must be selected.
- Reconstruction of irrigation sources, channels and watershed management (possibly using labor available through cash/food for work programs).
- Farm equipment support, including machinery where relevant.
- Debt relief for farmers who borrowed for cultivation after Hurricane Isaac, only to be devastated once more.

Rehabilitation and resilience

Haiti's vulnerability to weather catastrophes will only be intensified by climate change; indeed Hurricane Sandy's strength is widely thought to be linked to this phenomenon. Safeguarding food security therefore requires increased investment and promotion of climate resilient sustainable agriculture (CRSA), which will likely require changes in research and extension systems. Among the recommended changes:

- Strengthen the capacity of Haitian farmers to produce sustainably grown crops for their local markets;
- Build emergency seed reserves to address situations like this, where farmers' cultivation is interrupted and a new supply of seeds is necessary. Local knowledge and expertise, obtained through community participation, are crucial to ensuring that the right seeds are collected and preserved;
- Build emergency food reserves using locally produced food, and ensure that its acquisition does not disrupt local markets, to serve as the first line of defense for food security in emergency situations;

- Develop disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies through participatory processes, followed by trainings for local communities to ensure that they have the appropriate skills, infrastructure, and institutions to withstand hazards;
- Mainstream gender analysis and otherwise prioritize women farmers to maximize the effect on farming families;
- Tackle the important task of land and agrarian reform in Haiti, including land tenure security for smallholder farmers;
- Promote transparency and accountability to make clear to the Haitian people how and toward what aims agriculture is prioritized.

Heeding the warning signs and avoiding a dangerous delay

It is not unusual for emergency relief efforts to end with an analysis showing that better and earlier information would have permitted a stronger and faster response. But information in itself doesn't make the response happen. In this instance, the warning signs of an explosive food crisis in Haiti are clear, and the lessons learned from previous tragedies require us to provide an immediate and proportionate response now to avoid further deaths and disasters in Haiti.

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

ActionAid International
PostNet Suite 248
Private Bag X31
Saxonwold 2132
Johannesburg
South Africa

www.actionaid.org

ActionAid Haiti
6 Impasse Candelon
Delmas 48
Haiti

www.actionaid.org/haiti

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