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Repeatedly Hit by Nature Since 2010 Earthquake, Haiti Now Faces Massive Food Shortage

by George Rodríguez
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With thousands of people yet to recover from the devastating 2010 earthquake, affected by drought halfway through last year, and hit by Hurricane Isaac in August, nature dealt Haiti another blow in late October when Hurricane Sandy plowed through the Americas’ poorest nation.

The magnitude 7.0 earthquake of January 2010 (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010) had already worsened the chronically appalling situation of the approximately 9.7 million people of this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean nation, which neighbors the Dominican Republic, another highly impoverished country, on the island of Hispaniola.

The earthquake devastated the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, killed more than 200,000 people—some estimates put the figure above 300,000—displaced more than 600,000 others, and left some 1.5 million homeless. Around 350,000 quake-displaced Haitians are still living under unsafe, unhealthy conditions (NotiCen, April 29, 2010) in camps set up for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP).

A bit more than two years after the earthquake, severe drought struck northern Haiti in May and July, as the country was gearing up for its spring harvest, and with August came Hurricane Isaac, leaving a trail of more than 50 people killed, additional thousands displaced, some 200,000 homes destroyed or severely damaged, and around 40% of crops lost.

Hurricane Sandy latest disaster

To worsen the dire situation, Hurricane Sandy further ravaged Haiti in late October, leaving 54 people killed, another 21 missing, and anywhere from 15,000 to 20,000 homeless.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates that the drought and two storms battered the country’s agriculture—and the livelihood of some 1.5 million people—with a US$254 million blow.

Amelie Gauthier, communications officer in Port-au-Prince for the UK-based Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam), said in the aftermath of Sandy, "The cumulative effect of these disasters has meant loss of capital, revenue, and livelihoods for many people."

Areas of the country are "food insecure because of the drought and the impact of tropical storm Isaac. People borrowed money after Isaac to plant seeds, but these have been lost following Sandy. So there’s debt and the loss of crops," Gauthier pointed out.

Johan Peleman, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Haiti, said some 1.2 million people are thus facing food insecurity.

After Sandy left Haiti on its way to hit the eastern coast of the US, FAO senior coordinator in Haiti Adam Yao warned in a communiqué, "The recent natural disasters in Haiti require the robust response of the international community to support ongoing government efforts."
The UN agency and the Haitian government then began an effort to raise US$74 million during 12 months to help the agricultural sector recover, the FAO reported. It said that, of the global amount, US$4 million would be needed to assist some 20,000 rural families during the winter cropping season, which began last month.

In mid-November, Myrta Kaulard, UN World Food Programme (WFP) director in Haiti, stressed that "it is crucial to help Haitian farmers so that they can plant crops for the...December season and for the main agricultural season in the spring."

During the first week following Sandy, the WFP distributed food to approximately 14,000 people and announced that, with some 800 tons of foodstuffs, it would further assist 20,000 of the worst-hit families, besides focusing on treating and preventing malnutrition in some 100,000 children and women.

The WFP also said it would provide income to around 170,000 others working on activities such as rehabilitating agricultural land, flood control, and watershed management, through projects called Cash for Assets—which require funding worth US$19 million. Partners in this case are the Haitian government, the FAO, and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), among other specialized UN agencies, according to Kaulard.

"Our donors’ support is crucial not only to ensure that we maintain our emergency response capacity in Haiti, but also to support rural people to get back on their feet quickly," Kaulard said. "Without immediate cash contributions, the situation of these rural households will continue deteriorating until the next main crop in mid-2013."

**Funding for long-term development projects**

By late November, FAO director-general José Graziano da Silva told a joint press conference with Haiti’s President Michel Martelly in Rome—where the agency is headquartered—that, of the US$74 million sought, the FAO had already secured US$2.7 million and seemed on the verge of obtaining an additional US$5 million to US$6 million from donors.

The money is aimed at supporting recovery of irrigation networks, rural roads, seed production, as well as providing fertilizer, seeds, and tools to small farmers, helping them sow in the planting season, which began last month, providing assistance to inland fisheries, and vaccinating livestock.

In addition, a US$100,000 grant has been approved by the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to support the effort to produce funding for Haiti.

OCHA manages CERF, which it launched in 2006 as a tool for quickly delivering life-saving assistance, on a worldwide basis, to populations severely hit by natural events and other emergencies. CERF is funded through voluntary contributions from UN member states, as well as individual donors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), regional governments, and the private sector.

Da Silva also underlined what he said was the crucial role of investment in helping Haiti overcome its present crisis and warned that, "if we don’t invest today, we will pay the price tomorrow."

Emphasizing Da Silva’s point, FAO assistant director general for technical cooperation Laurent Thomas said, "If we don’t intervene quickly, over 60% of the population deriving their livelihood..."
from agriculture will be put at risk." Thomas referred to that portion of the country’s work force of 3.6 million people.

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