

Planting Now

Agricultural challenges and opportunities for Haiti's reconstruction



After the earthquake on 12 January 2010, a huge influx of displaced people moved to Haiti's 'rice basket', the Artibonite Valley. Some have managed to find work as day labourers on farms. Credit: Oxfam America/Ami Vitale.

Even before the devastating January 2010 earthquake, Haiti was one of the poorest and most food-insecure countries on earth. A majority of Haitians live in rural areas and depend on agricultural livelihoods, but neither the government nor the international community has paid sufficient attention to agriculture, leaving the countryside increasingly marginalized. Trade liberalization has exposed farmers to competition from subsidized US rice exports and made consumers vulnerable to volatile global food prices. Agriculture must have a central place in post-earthquake reconstruction, with an emphasis on improving small-scale farmers' access to resources, so as to boost their incomes and productivity, particularly with regard to staple food crops. Urgent attention is also needed to reversing severe natural resource degradation. The Haitian government has devised a comprehensive agricultural reconstruction plan. It could be strengthened with additional attention to supporting the role of women in agriculture and food security, building the capacity of rural people's organizations, and decentralizing service provision. Donors need to quickly provide adequate resources to implement the plan, and should ensure greater coherence between their development assistance and trade policies. Increased attention to agriculture is vital to helping the Haitian people achieve their short- and long-term reconstruction goals.

Summary

The massive earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010 devastated rural areas as well as urban, destroying crops, farm buildings, equipment, and infrastructure. Indirect effects touched almost every corner of the nation, as 600,000 people migrated to the countryside, increasing pressure on already stretched food and fuel resources. Internal displacement worsened food insecurity, which affected six out of ten people even before the disaster.

There is wide agreement that reconstruction will have to focus substantially on agriculture. The majority of Haitians live in rural areas and depend on agricultural activities for their livelihoods. But agricultural development faces serious constraints: years of inattention from the government and donors, technological stagnation, severe natural resource degradation, the dominant position of subsidized US rice in Haiti's markets, lack of credit and extension services, poor infrastructure, insecurity of tenure and bias against rural poor people in the land tenure and legal systems, growing dependence on imported food and food aid, and little value-added agricultural processing.

The compact between the state and its citizens is weak; corruption, neglect, and favouritism towards the urban elite have left many rural Haitians distrustful of the government. Too often, decision-making forums have excluded the voices of rural poor people. However, since 2006, the government and donors have given greater attention to agriculture and listened more carefully to Haitian citizens' views.

The immediate humanitarian response to the earthquake had a degree of bias towards external food aid, although some donors emphasized procurement from Haitian farmers. Massive distribution of seeds, tools, and fertilisers in the earthquake zone and to those hosting displaced people bolstered prospects for 2010 harvests, although donors did not provide enough resources to assist all targeted households.

The Haitian government has developed an ambitious \$772m agricultural reconstruction plan, focusing on infrastructure, sustainable production increases, value chains development, and rural service delivery. In keeping with the aid effectiveness principle of *ownership*, donors should support national plans developed in consultation with citizens, but so far, the international community has not provided all of the requested resources.

The government should prioritize mobilization of the national resources that the plan requires. Implementation should emphasize boosting small-scale farmers' incomes and productivity, particularly with regard to staple food crops. The government should also:

1. Carry out administrative and fiscal decentralization, with representative government institutions at all levels;

2. Encourage establishment of committees composed of elected officials and civil society representatives to plan and manage local development initiatives;
3. Institutionalize an effective system of checks and balances to control corruption at all levels of government;
4. As a first step towards improving land tenure security, ensure that the legal system gives equal recognition to both of Haiti's official languages, and provide expanded legal assistance so that rural citizens can obtain access to justice in such matters as land disputes;
5. Support efforts of farmers, rural poor people, and rural women to develop robust, representative organizations;
6. Formulate agricultural policies and design programmes that take into account the gender division of labour and support women in their agricultural marketing roles;
7. Bring idle state land into production in transparent ways, through leasing and employment of wage labourers;
8. Revitalize the network of decentralized agricultural research, extension, and training centres, and provide services to farmers in a consultative manner;
9. Ensure that small-scale farmers have access to credit;
10. Rehabilitate and expand rural infrastructure, particularly roads and irrigation works;
11. Mainstream environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction; emphasize reforestation, agroforestry, integrated watershed management, and promotion of fuel-efficient stoves.

In addition, the government should make health care and education available in rural areas and facilitate creation of off-farm employment opportunities, making rural areas attractive places to live and work.

Over the long term, the government and civil society should engage in a dialogue to arrive at a trade policy that balances tariff protection for Haitian farmers and affordable food prices for consumers.

For their part, all donors (bilateral and multilateral) and the international financial institutions should:

1. Prioritize agriculture and food security, align strategies with Haiti's National Agricultural Investment Plan and the agricultural and rural development objectives outlined above, and provide the resources required to implement the plan;
2. Fund local food aid purchase whenever appropriate, based on rigorous assessment of need and local market conditions;
3. Provide assistance in the form of grants, not loans;
4. Create mechanisms to incorporate civil society into the debate about development strategies; and
5. Adopt an accountability framework that allows assessment of fulfilment of commitments and contribution to improved food security.

Bilateral donors should ensure coherence between aid and trade policies. To this end, the United States should:

1. Exempt Haiti from the 'Bumpers Amendment' that prohibits assistance to production of food crops considered 'competitive' with US exports;
2. Reform trade-distorting rice subsidies that lead to dumping and undermine Haitian producers; and
3. Provide full duty- and quota-free access to the US market for Haitian exports.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org.

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