

Haiti earthquake not only devastated the capital city but weakened a long-neglected rural economy

New study documents earthquake's immediate impacts on farmers as well as chronic problems in agriculture that could slow economic recovery

As the inhabitants of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, continue to cope with the aftermath of the earthquake that shattered this city last January, as well as the new threat of a cholera endemic, the country's farmers, who make up 60% of the total population, are also struggling to overcome not just the initial shock but longstanding problems in a sorely neglected rural economy, according to a study released today.



The first of its kind in Haiti or anywhere else in the region, this research examined the effects of past emergency seed aid and identified needs for strengthening seed systems in Haiti. It involved extensive interviews and discussions with about 1,000 farmers held at 10 diverse rural sites across the country in May to June 2010. More than half a dozen organizations took part in the work, which was funded by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Immediately after the earthquake, planting dropped by about 16% across crops and regions, the study reports, mainly because farmers were short of cash for inputs. However, it was in the drought-stricken areas of the northwest that planting declined most steeply—by 36%—causing the rural poor to suffer acutely from the impact of the country's worst earthquake in 200 years on top of pre-existing environmental adversity.

Other effects of the earthquake, such as insecurity, limited supplies, scarce credit, and a lack of clients, severely harmed rural cooperatives which reported a 90% reduction in their commercial activity. These small-scale businesses are run primarily by women traders, referred to as "Madames Saras", and they are critical for ensuring household food security and adequate child nutrition.

However, more alarmingly, the study uncovered acute longstanding weaknesses in the country's agriculture, which will impede economic recovery unless a major effort is undertaken to bolster farm production and the technical and other services on which agricultural growth depends.

"Most of the constraints we identified are deeply chronic," said Louise Sperling, a seed systems expert with the Colombia-based International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT, its acronym in Spanish) and the study's coordinator. "Farmers cannot obtain new crop varieties, other inputs, or regular technical advice."

Only 14 % of farm households have gained access to any new crop variety over the last 5 years, and emergency distribution of seed in February and March accounted for half of this figure, according to the study. This lack of innovation and access to new technologies can have stagnating effects on agricultural systems, making them highly unstable in the face of natural disasters like the January earthquake.

The study also revealed that farmers depend heavily on local markets, another inherent issue. Rather than save seed from their harvest for the next planting, Haitian farmers consume or sell most of the crop and then buy about 75% of their seed locally at a cost of about US\$60-70 per season—a formidable expense for those living on the poverty line.

"In other countries, when farmers eat or sell their own seed, this is usually taken as a signal that seed systems are under stress, but in Haiti it's the normal practice," Sperling said. "Furthermore, what they

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buy each season is at a very high price so the cost of stagnation in agricultural systems is actually coming out of the pockets of Haiti's rural poor."

In terms of access to seeds, the results indicate that farmers had only minimal problems obtaining seed as a direct result of the earthquake and that perhaps the massive amounts of seed aid provided was misdirected, as it only accounted for 4% of the seed sown between February and June.

"Haitian farmers are under a lot of stress," said Shaun McGuire of the University of East Anglia, who was a partner in the study. "They have lost assets, and their production is highly vulnerable to ups and downs in the weather and in household finances. But the availability of seed per se is not a problem."

Two important exceptions to the generally fragile state of Haiti's seed systems are the production of irrigated rice and vegetables. Since both are handled on a more commercial basis, producers have the means to obtain improved crop seed and other production inputs.

The study also documented some of the broader livelihood impacts of the earthquake. Food consumption dropped steeply during the immediate aftermath of the earthquake—from an average of 2.48 meals per day to 1.59, in half of the rural households surveyed. This resulted from the exodus of homeless urban people to the countryside to live with family or friends, which swelled rural household size from an average of 6.44 individuals to 8.68. By June, the number of people in rural households had begun returning to normal, falling to 7.18 (still more than 10 % above pre-earthquake levels).

The report makes 44 recommendations aimed at fostering growth in Haiti's rural economy, with emphasis on small-scale agriculture. Specifically, it calls for significant investment and innovation to develop better means of testing and disseminating new crop varieties, new information systems relying on mobile phones that enable farmers to provide feedback, improved delivery of production inputs through shops where farmers routinely buy basic goods, and supporting the development of small agro-enterprises, especially for women.

The report also urges that emergency seed relief—involving large-scale dissemination of seed, mostly of improved varieties—be stopped immediately, since this practice can foster dependence and undermine local seed markets.

"Nationwide food riots during 2008, by toppling Haiti's government, sent a strong message heard around the world about the relationship between social stability and the production and availability of food, said Ruben Echeverria, Director General of CIAT. "This study offers new insights into the weaknesses of Haiti's agriculture as well as concrete advice on how to amend them."

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