

Saving Haitian Youth: How Agriculture Can End Famine and Restore Stability

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Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have recently classified Haiti as one of the top five global hunger hotspots, placing it at the highest level of concern [1]. The prolonged Haitian famine is mainly attributed to the increase in gang activity that has disrupted government functions and destabilized national institutions. In addition, climate-related shocks—such as hurricanes—have compounded the situation.

Armed groups have impeded food supply chains, leading to sharp increases in food prices and driving some residents to engage in survival-driven criminal activity. Children are among the most vulnerable, facing heightened risks of recruitment into armed groups and exposure to violence, prompting some observers to describe the crisis as “an attack on childhood.” The Haitian government has sought international support from Kenya to restore order to the country. However, Kenya is unwilling to intervene until a stable government is in place. Meanwhile, investing in agricultural development presents a critical domestic pathway to strengthening livelihoods, restoring food security, and ultimately supporting state capacity to address violence and insecurity.

Challenges in Haitian Agriculture and Food Security

Haitian agriculture currently suffers from inadequate infrastructure, limiting its potential for economic growth. The FAO reports that the small-scale and limited resources of Haitian farms make it difficult to engage in agricultural exportation [2]. The majority of farms in Haiti are family-run, with over one million families owning an average farm size of less than one hectare [3]. Family members handle all aspects of production, from planting to harvesting. However, degraded soil caused by deforestation, poor land management, and outdated equipment results in low yields. Crop production is particularly vulnerable to climate shocks, which are both frequent and devastating in Haiti, because the country lacks the infrastructure necessary for rapid recovery. For example, credit is limited in Haiti, preventing farmers from obtaining the funds to invest in essential equipment or labor to address these challenges. This organization of labor, land tenure, and financial limitations prevents farms from producing enough food beyond local needs, leaving little surplus for commercial trade or national distribution.

While imports alleviate food shortages, they are not a sustainable solution to eliminate famine. Haiti currently imports between 50% and 85% of food as its production of meat, sugar, and rice has decreased [4]. The International Trade Administration reported that the United States is Haiti's priority partner in international trade due to their close geographic proximity and mutually beneficial economic policies [5]. However, American products are more expensive than typical imports because their production costs are higher. Haiti's deteriorating economy will soon be unable to afford American products, leaving Haitians with no supply and no agricultural sector to replenish it. If Haiti wants to end famine in the long run, it must invest in agricultural development.

How Gang Violence Intensifies Challenges in the Agricultural Sector

The greatest barrier to ending famine in Haiti is gang violence. Haitians are unable to access food from imports because gangs currently have 80% control of major ports, including the capital city of Port-Au-Prince [6]. The blockage of imports with no domestic alternatives inflates food prices, making it difficult for vendors to obtain products and sell them at a reasonable price for consumers. Gangs further disrupt food supply chains by deterring people from leaving their homes due to the presence of weapons. Without people buying the limited goods and services that exist, it disrupts local markets and deepens economic stagnation.

Gang violence jeopardizes the future of governmental stability through the endangerment of Haitian youth. As gangs worsen the famine, one quarter of the entire child population in Haiti now consistently faces high levels of food insecurity [7]. Additionally, the education of more than 300,000 children has been disrupted due to population displacement and school closures, with 284 schools being destroyed in the last year alone [8]. This will have detrimental consequences for the skills and innovation of children that could contribute not only to agriculture but also to any sector of the economy. Even worse, there has been a 1,000 percent rise in sexual violence against children in Haiti [9]. With gangs offering what little sense of stability remains, child recruitment into armed groups surged by 70 percent in 2024 [9]. If there is any hope to protect Haitian youth, and therefore the future of Haiti, gang violence must be managed to restore stability and faith in the government.

Political Inclusion and Agricultural Investment for Stability

A proven method to dissolve gangs is through peace negotiations that focus on political inclusion and disarmament. Haitian gangs believe that they must maintain political power to protect their existence. The biggest challenge the Haitian government faces is that the gangs forcibly take control of the country through the use of weapons. The 2016 Colombian peace deal serves as inspiration for how governments can disarm a politically

driven group [10]. Two major factors contributed to the success of the guerrilla group FARC and the Colombian government. First, a state-guaranteed political party was created using temporary funding that would lead to its stability. Second, a group designed by all parties involved oversaw the disarmament process. If this trust-building approach were to be adopted in Haiti, it would satisfy gangs wanting to be included in political processes and the government wanting to control law enforcement.

With restored governance and reduced gang influence, efforts to restructure and revitalize Haiti's agricultural sector can move forward. The first step to promote efficiency is to link farms through associations. They can provide spaces for the more than one million farms that exist to share successful strategies, coordinate transportation of goods to reduce costs, and advocate for their needs. It is crucial to include women and youth in the membership and leadership of these associations because they are just as integral in crop production as the men.

The second step to improve the capacity of these farms is to develop their agricultural technical skills through training, capacity building, and adequate farming systems. Associations can host joint training sessions, led by experts, to educate farmers on best practices to overcome challenges. Including discussion components in this non-family structured space can empower women and youth to participate in decision-making and propose solutions. Associations also help establish cooperatives, allowing farmers to share the costs of advanced equipment while collectively benefiting from their use.

The final step is to improve the mobile movement of money. If payments can be made and received with mobile banking, farmers do not need to carry cash, decreasing the chances of robbery. Additionally, mobile money informs farmers of current market prices, ensuring they do not lose money from the limited products they own.

These projects build a skilled agricultural workforce that can support and stimulate growth in other sectors. For instance, the formation of a soil management team can ensure conditions are optimal for food production. By creating specialized teams to reduce the need for excess workers in the agricultural sector, people can work in other sectors of the economy. An increase in job opportunities invites women and youth to get involved to meet the demand for labor, reducing wage gender gaps while increasing national productivity in Haiti. The development of transportation and trade is just as important as agriculture because food production alone cannot eliminate famine. They enhance food supply chains and increase food security. The strengthening of the formal economy can have other positive impacts, such as regaining the trust of youth by providing them with viable alternatives to gang life. Their education can be restored in a safe environment where children become productive citizens and promote a prosperous future for Haiti.

Conclusion

The famine in Haiti is a result of infrastructural weaknesses exacerbated by decades of gang violence. The solutions are not simple and require long-term investment in agriculture and peace-building, but they hold promise. Rebuilding efforts must be considerate of reintegrating gang members, coordinating farmers, and incorporating youth if they are to restore safety, develop farming expertise, and lay the foundation for a more resilient, self-sufficient Haiti. Agricultural development has the potential to transform Haiti from a place where youth feel that gang life is the only way of life to one where they are active participants in the food security of Haiti.

Other ideas for Haiti's famine may include:

1. **Land Reform and Legal Clarity:** Ensure secure land tenure to encourage investment in farming and enable access to credit; training farmers on financial literacy.
2. **Market Access and Infrastructure:** Rebuild rural roads, storage, and irrigation systems to connect farmers with markets and reduce post-harvest losses.
3. **Technical Training and Extension Services:** Equip farmers, especially youth and women, with modern agricultural practices and business skills.
4. **Agro-Cooperatives and Collective Models:** Support cooperative farming to increase scale, bargaining power, and resilience.
5. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Engage private sector actors to invest in agricultural value chains, processing, and exports.
6. **Conflict Resolution and Community-Led Security:** Empower communities to lead local peace-building efforts and offer alternatives to gang involvement.

Together, these strategies can foster economic inclusion, reduce violence, and build a more food-secure and resilient Haiti.

By transforming agriculture into a source of stability and opportunity, Haiti can shift the narrative from survival to sustainability; where young people are engaged not in cycles of violence, but in building a more food-secure and self-reliant future.

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