

EXECUTIVE BRIEF: HAITI

Implications of the earthquake on food security in Haiti

January 26, 2010

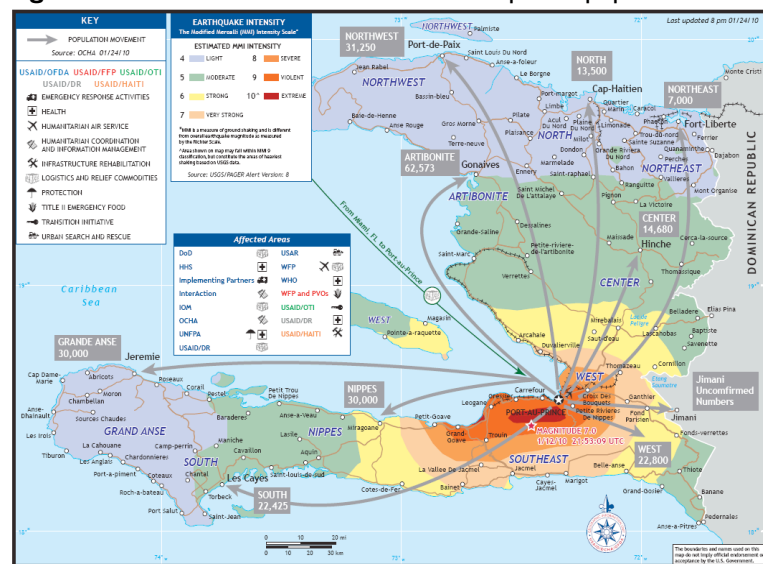
Key Messages

- The January 12, 2010 earthquake near Port-au-Prince has led to an acute humanitarian crisis in the capital and in the surrounding areas, with immediate, medium-term, and long-term consequences for food security in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area and throughout the country.
- In the short-term, household food security in Port-au-Prince is principally affected by the loss of income caused by the severe decline in income-earning opportunities. Food security has also been impacted through damage to infrastructure and property in Port-au-Prince and through immediate increases in food prices, although the majority of markets in Port-au-Prince are well-stocked and functioning for the time being.
- In the rest of the country, food security will be affected by the massive displacement of populations toward rural and urban areas outside of Port-au-Prince. This displacement will have impacts on food availability and natural resources (e.g., increasing depletion of trees for charcoal production) in many areas of the country.

Background

A violent earthquake on January 12, 2010 severely affected the city of Port-au-Prince, located approximately 14 kilometers from the epicenter of the earthquake. Other cities including Léogane, Petit-Goâve, Jacmel, and Miragoâne, were also severely affected. The Department of Civil Protection estimates that approximately 115,000 people were killed and 200,000 people were wounded. The physical damage (particularly to large buildings and the electricity grid) is enormous and almost all Haitian families were directly or indirectly affected. The destruction of houses and buildings is concentrated in the center of Port-au-Prince, Delmas, Carrefour, and Léogane (Figure 1). The damage caused by the earthquake has direct and indirect impacts on food security in Port-au-Prince and throughout the country, due to the earthquake's impact on markets, infrastructure, population displacement, prices, and numerous other factors.

Figure 1. Most affected areas and flows of displaced populations



Source : USAID/OFDA

The rapid deployment of international humanitarian assistance (including distributions of water and food and search and rescue operations) has helped to save many lives. However, more than a week after the disaster, assistance to the affected populations remains constrained by the challenges in coordinating logistics, response actions, and civil security.

Major food security implications

Livelihoods and income sources

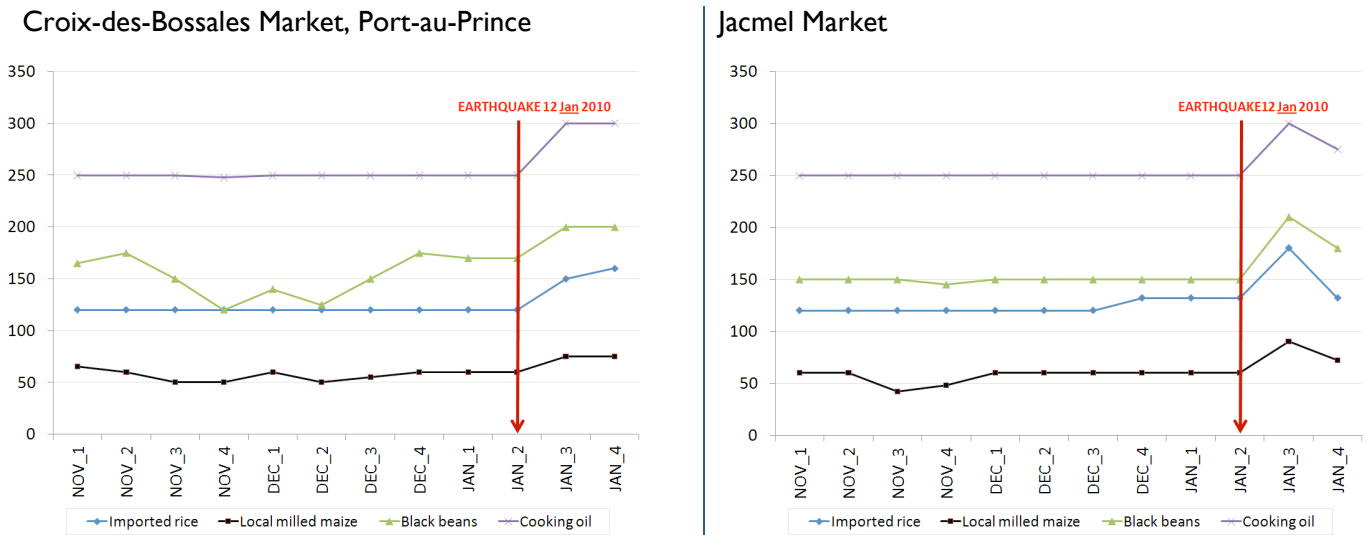
- All wealth groups have been affected by the earthquake, and the vast majority of people have lost homes, shops, and personal property. According to a study conducted by FEWS NET/CNSA in May and June 2009, the poorest segments of the population earn a living from street hawking, temporary employment, wage employment, and small businesses. Therefore, an increase in the unemployment rate among the economically active population, following the destruction of productive assets, along with the likely postponement or abandonment of certain investments that had been anticipated, will have a major impact on household-level food security for the poor and very poor segments of the population, which constitute about 65 percent of the population. Though petty street trading, mostly for local farm produce, has gradually resumed in parts of Port-au-Prince, this decline in employment constitutes the most important factor aggravating the food insecurity for households in the metropolitan area in the medium term. Recovery for these populations will depend in part on the resumption of the country's economic activity.
- Household level income will also be affected by the death or injury of income providers. Most Haitian households are dependent on markets for food purchases, and therefore cash income for food, even in rural areas, is critical. Rural households obtain a portion of their revenues through cash transfers from cities within Haiti and from the Haitian community abroad.
- The shortage of healthcare related to the destruction of hospitals and health centers and the limitation of childcare further reduce the income-earning capacity for injured populations, and require those in need of healthcare to travel long distances for care. Travel required for healthcare is expensive and will reduce those resources that would normally be devoted to food and agriculture (i.e., purchase of inputs for the next cropping season beginning in March).

Population displacements

- In the short term, food security in areas outside of Port-au-Prince will be affected by the massive displacement of populations to rural and urban areas outside of the metropolitan area (Figure 1), aided by free transportation provided by the Government of Haiti (GOH). This movement is expected to exert additional pressure on available food and environmental resources (e.g., firewood), particularly in departments such as Artibonite and the Northwest, which experience chronic food insecurity. The GOH and UN agencies estimate the size of the displaced population to be between 150,000 and 200,000 people, as of January 25. According to the GOH, the number of displaced persons will eventually reach about one million people, though this population is expected to gradually return to Port-au-Prince as reconstruction begins, probably within three months.

Food availability and food prices

- In the short term, deficits in the food supply are expected to be met through emergency food aid distributions, as well as food stocks from the harvest underway in the major agricultural production areas of the country. CNSA and FEWS NET anticipate a relatively good harvest that would support local food availability until the end of March. The main crops to be harvested are sweet potatoes, sorghum, and congo peas. The supply of tubers is particularly abundant, aided by a program to increase sweet potato yields and resist crop disease. The bean harvest in the plains area will begin in February.
- Because the earthquake did not affect key roads, market infrastructure, domestic stocks, or wholesale stores, markets in Port-au-Prince and other major cities are well supplied with fresh local produce (sweet potatoes, bananas, fruits, and vegetables). However, the department of Grande Anse (i.e., Jérémie) is poorly supplied with imported products because of damage to the port of Port-au-Prince. However, the port is being repaired and is gradually resuming normal activities.
- Prices for staple foods increased significantly in the week following the earthquake, especially in Port-au-Prince (Figure 2). In the months to come, assuming the continued importance of food aid distribution, prices will likely stabilize or decline. CNSA and FEWS NET plan to increase monitoring of food prices across the country.

Figure 2. Weekly price trends for key food commodities before and after the earthquake (in gourdes/6 lbs)

Source: FEWS NET/CNSA

Food security outcomes and recommendations

The impact of the above factors will increase the size of the food insecure population, though emergency food aid will help to reduce this number. The size of the food insecure population will be better estimated in the weeks to come as joint evaluations are conducted.

To improve the food security situation, CNSA and FEWS NET suggest the following actions:

- Stakeholders at the strategic, administrative, and operational levels (government, donors, UN agencies, private sector, etc.) should intensify and better coordinate emergency actions both in the metropolitan area and in the provincial towns and begin reconstruction activities as soon as possible.
- Develop and rapidly implement a national post-disaster reconstruction program with a focus on job creation, urban housing and the reduction of chronic vulnerability, particularly among chronically poor populations.
- Establish committees to support the municipalities of affected areas in terms of planning and distribution of food aid.
- As local foods are available at present, and as food trade resumes, consider the use of cash-based interventions rather than imported food aid.
- Develop a stronger focus on non-food assistance, particularly shelter. As the rainy season begins in early March, and early indications are that rainfall will be above normal, shelter assistance will be crucial. Most people in the affected areas are still sleeping outside.