

# Food Insecurity in Haiti from A Social Lens

Andy Chen

Deerfield Academy, USA

## ABSTRACT

Haiti grapples with a deepening food crisis, as 4.7 million people face acute insecurity, a stark rise since 2019. The Food and Agricultural Organization cites armed gang violence, diminished agricultural output, and the 2021 earthquake as primary factors. Gangs exacerbate the situation by controlling ports, causing fuel shortages, and disrupting essential services. While solutions proposed by international organizations range from criminal institution reform to foreign military intervention, locals and NGOs question their efficacy. The earthquake adds to the woes, necessitating immediate humanitarian aid, though delayed assistance raises doubts about Haiti's dependency on foreign aid organizations and the government's efficacy. In the backdrop of economic turmoil, a faltering agriculture system, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Haiti's challenges persist, calling for comprehensive, long-term strategies addressing the root cause—social and governmental instability.

## Causes of Food Insecurity in Haiti

Haiti is a country suffering from increasing food insecurity. In September 2022, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) identified 4.7 million people experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, rendering 48% of the country as suffering from severe malnutrition. This is an increasing percentage: since 2019, the percentage of people who are food secure fell from 41% to 24%, and the percentage of people in the “emergency” phase, meaning those who “have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality”, grew from 7% to 18%. Their report identified armed gang violence, decrease in agricultural production, and the earthquake in August 2021 as major causes for the increasing food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Kitroeff and Abi-Habib's New York Times report on October 2021 also points to gang violence as a cause for societal instability; by blocking major ports and fuel delivery, gangs have caused fuel shortages, causing shut-downs for transportation, cell towers, businesses, and hospitals, which mostly rely on fuel-powered generators.<sup>2</sup> The UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs corroborates on the exacerbating effects of the earthquake, estimating 800,000 who were affected and displaced with damaged infrastructure and roads blocking emergency aid.<sup>3</sup>

## Effects of Gang Violence and Perspective On Solutions

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<sup>1</sup> IPC, "HAITI: IPC Analysis of Acute Food Insecurity | September 2022 - June 2023," infographic, IPC, September 2022, file:///Users/jchen25/Downloads/IPC\_Haiti\_Acute\_Food\_Insecurity\_22Sept\_23Jun\_Snap-shot\_French.pdf.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Kitroeff and Maria Abi-Habib, "Gangs Rule Much of Haiti. For Many, It Means No Fuel, No Power, No Food.," New York Times, October 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/world/americas/haiti-gangs-fuel-shortage.html>.

<sup>3</sup> OCHA, "Haiti Earthquake: Humanitarian Response," infographic, OCHA, August 2021, file:///Users/jchen25/Downloads/HTI%20Earthquake%20Business%20Guide.pdf.

According to the report by Global Initiative, an international civil-society organization, there are some 200 gangs in Haiti, with 95 of them located in the capital. These gangs have seized the power vacuum left behind by an ineffective government, in turn controlling major sea ports through violence, halting food deliveries, and putting thousands at risk of food insecurity. The report proposes reform of criminal institutions, including disarmament and social reintegration of gang members.<sup>4</sup> Others, like Paul Collier, a professor of economics at Oxford University, support more direct actions, citing the success of foreign military interventions like the MINUSTAH (the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the acting prime minister, Aviel Henry, has called for “the immediate deployment of a specialized armed force in sufficient quantity” to intervene in the country, recognizing the intensifying crisis of gang violence.<sup>6</sup> However, many locals oppose such interventions: in a collective letter to President Biden, nearly 100 Haitian organizations encouraged the United States to “not use [their] military to change regimes or remake societies.” They believe that “the deployment of a military force now will... [do] little to ameliorate the root causes of today’s crisis”, and call on the United States to “respect the fundamental rights of the Haitian people to shape Haitian solutions.”<sup>7</sup>

## Effects of Earthquake and Perspective On Solutions

According to the FAO report, the 2021 Haiti earthquake struck the country’s southernmost regions on the 14th of August, bringing three of its districts to the “emergency” phase. The report suggests immediate humanitarian aid to those regions to address the crisis.<sup>8</sup> Another humanitarian organization, OCHA, organized a fundraiser effort online, attempting to provide emergency aid to those in need.<sup>9</sup> UNICEF provided emergency aid as well, distributing rations and hygiene kits to 2,000 families and providing 18 hospitals with additional health supplies within 16 days of the disaster.<sup>10</sup> Many locals, however, were doubtful of receiving much help; Anatoly Kurmanae and Andre Paultre of the New York Time reports that weeks after the disaster, many in the nation’s far-off regions had yet to receive treatment, treatment that the government had promised. The article calls Haiti “a republic of NGOs”, highlighting Haiti’s dependency on foreign aid organizations and its ineffectiveness to provide aid outside of its capital. According to Junior Alcendor, the local civil protection chief of L’Asile, “We have been abandoned by the state.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Global Initiative, *Gangs of Haiti: Expansion, Power, and an Escalating Crisis*, 3, October 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GITOC-Gangs-of-Haiti.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Heine and Andrew S. Thompson, *Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and beyond* (New York: United Nations University Press, 2011), xvii, <https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:2516/ebrary9789280811971.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, “Haiti’s Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention,” International Crisis Group, last modified December 14, 2022, [https://crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/haiti/b048-haitis-last-resort-gangs-and-prospect-foreign-intervention#\\_ftn1](https://crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/haiti/b048-haitis-last-resort-gangs-and-prospect-foreign-intervention#_ftn1).

<sup>7</sup> Letter by 1804 Institute et al., “Haiti Military Force Organizational Sign-on,” October 31, 2022, <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Haiti-Military-Force-Organizational-Sign-on.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> IPC, “HAITI: IPC Analysis,” infographic.

<sup>9</sup> OCHA, “Haiti Earthquake,” infographic.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, *Earthquake Haiti Humanitarian Situation Report No. 4*, 2, August 30, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/unicef-haiti-humanitarian-situation-report-no-4-earthquake-30-august-2021>.

<sup>11</sup> Anatoly Kurmanae and Andre Paultre, “‘We’re on Our Own’: Many Earthquake Survivors Expect No Help From Haitian Officials,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/americas/haiti-quake-aid.html>.

## Conclusion

Gang violence and natural disasters have disturbed Haiti's society. These issues, coupled with other concerns like COVID-19, an economic crisis, and a failing agricultural system, have caused millions to be at risk and food insecure. Many NGOs, like Global Initiative, the FAO, OCHA, and UNICEF, have attempted to analyze and propose solutions to solve hunger in Haiti, mostly through providing emergency aid in the form of military force and medical supplies. Locals, however, doubt their successfulness.

Ultimately, these solutions are short-term and don't address the root of Haiti's social and food insecurity: an unstable government. A government with a weak police force fails to control gangs, and those gangs have risen up and seized fuel ports in an attempt to force the incumbent prime minister to step down. A government who fails to deliver emergency aid in a timely manner has in turn become dependent on foreign aid organizations. Haiti's people and its government will have to find a way to address its social instability in order to lead the country out of hunger.

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