

Study recommends changes to emergency seed aid

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A major study of agriculture in Haiti after this year's earthquake has found that much of the emergency seed aid provided after the disaster was not targeted to emergency needs. The report concludes that seed aid, when poorly-designed, could actually harm farmers or depress local markets, therefore hampering recovery from emergencies.

Indeed, agricultural interventions in Haiti should move away from their emergency focus, and confront farmers' longer-term challenges, especially their poor access to new [crop varieties](#).

The recommendations follow the first-ever Seed System Security Assessment (SSSA) in Haiti, which saw an international team of researchers, including Dr Shawn McGuire of the University of East Anglia (UEA), look at the impact of the January 12 earthquake on the livelihoods of farming families.

The work, carried out across 10 regions of Haiti in May and June, considered how the earthquake affected the resources and activities of farming households in the seasons immediately following the disaster. Changes in labour, crops planted, and commercial activities were analysed alongside important seed-related issues, particularly farmers' ability to obtain the seed and planting material they desired, in time to sow. After the earthquake, a widely-held assumption that farmers did not have seed led to extensive seed aid delivered across Haiti. The study also examined the effects of seed aid given. Nearly a thousand farmers were interviewed, along with in-depth studies and dozens of interviews and

group discussions.

The SSSA was funded by the Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and coordinated by the International Center for [Tropical Agriculture](#) (CIAT), working with Catholic Relief Services, UEA, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, NGOs, and Haiti's Ministry of Agriculture.

Agriculture makes up one third of Haiti's [gross domestic product](#) (GDP), and organisations have conducted seed relief there for years. Much of the country received seed aid following the earthquake, in February and March, but the assessment found that, for several regions receiving emergency aid, there was little evidence the earthquake directly affected agriculture. Despite the enormous impact of the earthquake, most farmers could get the seed they need. The assessment also highlighted cases where seed was given out late, or failed to germinate.

Dr McGuire, senior lecturer in natural resources at UEA's School of International Development, said: "Emergency seed distributions are not needed as often as you think, and they are not harmless - delivering seed aid that is mal-adapted or does not germinate makes stressed farmers even more vulnerable. And large-scale distributions prevent the development of local seed markets that are geared to farmers' needs rather than donors' decisions.

"If you are going to do seed aid, you need to target it to actual, rather than assumed, needs. We found that there were no short term seed security problems, aside from those linked to finances. Seed was available in local markets, but some couldn't afford to buy it. So the type of aid response - large-scale seed distributions - often did not match the seed security problem at hand. The immediate problem was clearly one of financial stress, which can lead to problems accessing a range of

goods, including seed. While the earthquake weakened many families' finances, chronic poverty in Haiti was the real underlying issue."

The team recommended that emergency seed aid should only be used to address emergency problems. Aid organisations should ensure the seed they make available is adapted to local conditions, fits with farmers' preferences, and is at least as good as what they normally use. As poverty is more often the constraint in Haiti, rather than an absence of seed, vouchers should be developed more widely, as this gives farmers choice and can help support local markets.

The assessment also found that farmers have had very limited access to new crops or to improved crop varieties in the last five years, and recommended that steps are taken to develop and identify new varieties which can be introduced.

"One of the most striking things we found was that only 14% of farmers had encountered any new crop variety in the last five years, with more than half these new varieties coming in the February and March 2010 emergency distribution alone," explained Dr McGuire. "Very little innovation reaches Haitian farmers, far less than in other very poor countries, such as Ethiopia. Most countries have public and private sector institutions identifying new crop types and supplying seed, but these institutions are weak in Haiti. The main long term issues are the chronic poverty in farming and the lack of variety in their crops."

The immediate impact of the earthquake on agriculture was the massive displacement of people from Port au Prince to rural areas, which put pressure on the limited resources of farmers. The earthquake has also disrupted market functioning which affected farmers' revenues.

However, the assessment showed that, for most indicators, Haitian farmers have bounced back quickly from the immediate effects of the earthquake. Most migrants have returned to the cities. Though farmers

did sow 16% less seed than normal immediately after the earthquake, they plan to sow more than normal in the following season.

The team identified longer-term challenges, particularly for women-headed households. Women play critical roles in the seed production and market system, and are often responsible for storing food and seed. Rural commerce, managed principally by women, has decreased by up to 90-92% in some areas.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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