

IN FOCUS

Migration and the Environment: The case of Hurricane Sandy in Haiti

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From 23 to 26 October 2012, the western and southern regions of Haiti were heavily affected by Hurricane Sandy. After a drought and Tropical Storm Isaac, Hurricane Sandy was the third natural disaster to strike the country in 2012. Haiti was still recovering from the lingering impacts of the 2010 earthquake. Over 347,000 people remained in 450 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) sites – i.e. camps and more ad-hoc facilities hosting evacuees – at the end of 2012 (IOM 2013:1). Cholera, gender-based violence, and food insecurity, among other issues, remained prevalent.

Preparedness and preventive evacuation

Prior to and during Hurricane Sandy, the Government of Haiti issued successive Orange and Red Alerts and activated the National Risk Management and Disaster Plan (PNGRD) (FAO 2012:3). The Haitian Government, led by the Civil Protection Directorate and with the support of the Haitian Red Cross, Haitian Civil Society and international partners, worked to put into practice a preparedness strategy, involving awareness-raising among vulnerable populations to natural disasters and a “newly-developed system of short-term, preventive evacuation” for the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, building on the success of the first preventive evacuation organized in response to Tropical Storm Isaac (Mellicker 2013:1). Implementing such a strategy was initially challenged by the reluctance of a few international actors and vulnerable people to evacuate (Gitau 2013). There were concerns that it would lead to long-term displacement or increase insecurity and theft. None of these scenarios took place and the preventive evacuation was considered to be successful, thus earning support both from the evacuees and the international partners. The Haitian National Agencies maintained leadership and received assistance from their international partners, which were extensively involved in funding and building the shelters used for preventive evacuation. The international community also supported evacuations and provided the evacuees with humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs. Over 20,000 people would have been evacuated to 136 shelters (IOM 2012, p1). Some vulnerable families also evacuated to other types of shelter, for example, with host families. Most evacuees left the shelters in the days after the passing of Hurricane Sandy (Mellicker 2013¹).

Migration as a response to damaged homes and livelihoods

Despite evacuations, Hurricane Sandy heavily impacted the Haitian population. Severe flooding and landslides resulted from the violent winds and heavy rain and caused immediate and significant damage to houses, public infrastructure and crops. The combination of Hurricane Sandy, the drought and Tropical Storm Isaac led over 3.44 million people to be affected by food insecurity (IOM 2013:2).

1. Correspondence

The housing damage resulted in internal displacement, as over 33,760 families, including 7,450 families already in IDP camps, lost their homes. Most of these people were accommodated by friends, family or neighbors. Others stayed in evacuation shelters. Over 2,000 of these people could not return home as their houses and lands had been destroyed and did not have access to alternative shelter solutions (FAO 2012:7). They stayed with families, friends or in temporary shelters at the site of their destroyed houses for several months, until they were able to rebuild or repair their houses (Mellicker 2013²).

There is a general consensus that, on the long run, Hurricane Sandy's most important effect on migration relates to food security (Mellicker 2013³). In order to cope with the severe damage inflicted on agricultural output, crops and cattle, some people used migration as a positive adaptation strategy, moving to less affected rural areas or to urban areas. It is also assumed that migration towards the Dominican Republic increased significantly (Gitau 2013). No mechanisms so far have tracked these population movements and it is therefore hard to evaluate the numbers of people concerned.

Conclusion

The success of the strategy implemented prior to and during Hurricane Sandy in Haiti demonstrated the importance of preparedness and preventive evacuation to decrease vulnerability. It underlined the necessity to consolidate such strategies by improving disaster preparedness-mechanisms such as tracking mechanisms, monitoring, and alert raising systems. The damage resulting from the storm also emphasized the need for mitigation measures, as well as the necessity to limit environmental degradation in Haiti.

References

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2. Correspondence
3. Correspondence