

Roots for peace: uncovering climate security challenges in Haiti and what to do about them

POLICY BRIEF

A ‘ticking time bomb’ – the interlinkages between climate, peace and security in Haiti

“Climate change impacts adversely affect food security, water scarcity and the humanitarian situation in the country, eventually aggravating any existing instability. With the effects of climate change, existing trends around vulnerability and resilience in rural and urban Haiti will worsen, and new conflict dynamics and mobility patterns can emerge.” – UNSC Res. 2692 (2023)

Haiti is considered the most vulnerable country in Latin America and the Caribbean to climate change, and already experiences significant climate risks. Notably, these include rising temperatures, declining rainfall, an increasing number of hot days, more intense hurricanes and rising sea levels that threaten to compound coastal erosion and flooding. These risks all interact with centuries of practices that have eroded Haiti’s natural environment on which so many rely, and are converging with other political and socio-economic factors which only reinforce climate change impacts. For policy makers, it is essential to understand how climate change and environmental degradation interact with the ongoing crisis in Haiti in order to address them. Without effective responses to address these compounding risks, the trends displayed in **Table 1 below** are set to intensify over the next 30 years.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS



Haiti is already experiencing significant **climate change risks**:

- **Rising temperatures** and overall declining rainfall levels, with seasons shifting and becoming less predictable.
- **Increase in periods of drought** and heavy precipitation events, heightening the risk of flooding and landslides.
- **Hurricanes and tropical storms**, most recently Hurricane Matthew, regularly wreaking havoc across the country.
- **Marine heatwaves**, ocean acidity and sea level rise, with increased risks of coastal erosion and flooding as well as losses in coastal and marine ecosystem services.



In addition, Haiti suffers from severe **environmental degradation**:

- **Deforestation** and soil degradation.
- **Poor waste management** and pollution, especially water and land.
- **Water scarcity** and poor water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) conditions.

POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS



Haiti is in the midst of a **deep security, political, economic and humanitarian crisis**:

- **Food insecurity** is at an all-time high: a record 4.9 million people are currently facing acute hunger.
- **Humanitarian assistance** is needed by more than 42 per cent of Haiti’s population.
- **Armed gangs** control most of Haiti’s capital, and increasingly other urban centres, using violent tactics, including rape, sexual and gender-based violence.
- **The Haitian economy** has been contracting for four consecutive years, and inflation is the highest in a decade, resulting in a dramatic increase in the cost of living.
- **The assassination of President Jovenel Moise** in 2021 has plunged the country into further political chaos.
- **A cholera epidemic** is in full swing.

Table 1: Climate, environmental, political and socio-economic impacts in Haiti

In order to tackle these insecurities and to move the country on a path towards sustainable development and peace, the **Haiti Climate Security Working Group** was established in 2022 at the initiative of the United Nations (UN) and Haiti’s Ministry of the Environment (MDE), bringing together UN agencies, international organisations, Haitian government institutions and civil society organisations. To help guide the work of this group, adelphi led a collaborative effort to undertake a study mapping out the linkages between climate, peace and security in Haiti and proposing initial steps on how to resolve them. The study is the baseline document that informed this policy brief.

How to assess climate, peace and security linkages? – Research Methodology

The study on climate, peace and security in Haiti outlines the state of the environment and climate change in the country by looking at past, current and future trends, and how these interact with pre-existing drivers of insecurity. It aimed at raising awareness and accelerating adaptation to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on various dimensions of security, while strengthening resilience.

The study was based on the multi-disciplinary, context-based, locally-grounded and intersectional [Weathering Risk methodology](#). The analysis of the impact pathways and dimensions of resilience was informed by interviews with representatives of Haitian civil society organisations, Haitian and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies, government officials and researchers, as well as people from different backgrounds (environmental activists, peacebuilders, agronomists, students, etc.) in various neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince. Focus group discussions were also held with people engaged in farming, fishing and trade, as well as community leaders and civil society organisations in the South, Grand’Anse, North, North-East and Nippes departments, and with vulnerable young people in Cité Soleil. Interviews took place in English, French and Haitian Kreyol, and respondents included both men and women, young and elderly people, people with disabilities, internally displaced people and migrants.

Five climate security risk pathways in Haiti

The study identified **five risk interrelated pathways** through which the impacts of climate change compound insecurity in Haiti, thereby **affecting food systems, livelihood security, community relations and social cohesion**, and ultimately **contributing to violence and conflict**.

Pathway 1: Disasters worsen government shortfalls, hindering response and prevention efforts.

“Leta pran li pa bay” (The state takes [from you] but does not give [to you.]) – A common proverb held in southern Haitian communities

The **limited capacity of the Haitian government to implement the necessary policies** and investments for managing disasters worsens the impacts of climate-induced natural hazards. Although the

disaster risk management system has been improved in the past years, policy enforcement and response capacities remain inadequate. Decades of **environmental degradation, poor urban planning and lack of waste management systems** have exacerbated the impacts of disasters, often **to the particular detriment of vulnerable groups**, such as those with mobility issues, those who are poor or reliant on climate-sensitive economics, many of whom are women, and those living in insecure dwellings.

Pathway 2: Climate change pushes people into harmful adaptation practices and exacerbates competition over natural resources.

“Trees are our alternatives when we have no money. We know how important trees are for the environment, we know that they give life, food, shade and protect the soil. But if the climate abandons us, what choice do we have?” – Farmers in the Nippes Department.

The impacts of climate change and inadequate disaster risk management push Haitians to find **alternative livelihoods, which bring their own social and environmental risks**. Lacking other options, many farmers resort to agricultural practices that are unsustainable or damaging to the natural environment. For instance, farmers continue to use slash-and-burn farming which drives **deforestation, soil degradation and biodiversity loss**. As climate change makes it more and more difficult to live off agriculture, people have no choice but to move away from rural areas. Thus, mobility within rural areas and between livelihood groups, as well as **migration towards urban centres** have been dominant coping strategies. Rural-urban migration especially has put immense demographic pressures on Haitian cities throughout time, leading to violent competition over dwindling resources, as well as overcrowded slums with poor water, hygiene and sanitation conditions, where gang leaders rule over political, economic and social life.

Since the 2021 crisis hit Haiti, urban violence has reached such extreme levels that a reverse pattern has also emerged; people have started fleeing urban areas to return to rural areas, adding pressure to already precarious natural resources.



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Migration patterns in Haiti

In Haiti, migration is not just a geographical phenomenon of people leaving rural for urban areas (or the opposite) or fleeing the country overall. Migration between subsistence systems has also intensified due to the effects of climate change. In this context, many Haitians can be de facto described as **climate migrants**.

Pathway 3: Climate change harms social cohesion when people leave their communities.

“Friends and family will always go and check out people that they know to see whether they may need help and offer them some support.” – About Haiti’s strong tradition of mutual aid

Many Haitians escape the rising violence and insecurity by **moving to countries like the United States, the Dominican Republic, or other Caribbean countries**. Even though remittances and

diaspora investments contribute significantly to Haiti’s economy, there are high socio-economic and health-related risks connected to international migration. The social fabric of neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and communities in Haiti is falling apart, as people there no longer know each other. Therefore, **the absence of social cohesion as a coping mechanism** translates into even less capacity for Haitians to withstand climate security risks.

Pathway 4: Climate change increases young Haitians' vulnerability.

*"For young people arriving in Port-au-Prince, the few things they can do nowadays to make some kind of a living is getting involved in crime and violence."
– Key expert interview with activist in Port-au-Prince*

In rural areas, youth involved in farming, pastoralism or fisheries are exposed to high levels of uncertainty, **pushing them to migrate to cities**

where they often find even fewer economic opportunities. In overcrowded urban slums, most children lack education, access to water, food, and positive role models, making them **susceptible to armed group recruitment.** Young women migrating to the city often have to rely on sex work. Kidnappings and torture, and, especially for girls and young women, **sexual and gender-based violence** perpetrated at the hands of armed gangs occur daily.

Pathway 5: Institutional fragility and increasing violence undermine climate action and finance opportunities.

"Government representatives would always say they do not have the means to support the population during difficult times." – Focus group discussions in Petit trou de Nippes, Nippes.



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While climate change exacerbates security challenges and violence, the opposite dynamic is true as well: **institutional fragility and widespread violence in Haiti hamper the implementation of effective climate change policies and programmes.** Adequate resources and capacities to implement any policies on climate change adaptation and disaster risk management are absent at the national and local level. Gangs looting NGOs or UN agencies or road blockades impeding aid to marginalised areas make resource-intensive development aid unfeasible. Climate finance institutions' reluctance to lend to countries with high instability jeopardises Haiti's access to climate finance opportunities.

Existing Responses

“How do you convince people to protect and restore the natural environments when their main concern is to find enough food to survive, or to rebuild their home after yet another disaster? People have bigger issues than thinking about nature.” – Interview with a Haitian environmentalist

National and international actors have undertaken several attempts to begin addressing climate and environmental security risks. However, some of these have caused additional grievances in some segments of the Haitian society. At times, these result in open and violent resistance against the state and international interveners. With that said, many Haitians are themselves finding ways to adapt, and organising around the need to find solutions that work for them, addressing the worst excesses of climate change impacts:



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- **Haitian institutional and policy responses:** The Haitian government has issued important strategies for climate change adaptation in various sectors, but their implementation often lags behind due to budgetary constraints or limited human resources. The links between climate and security remain unarticulated in government responses. Environmental stewardship is seldom a priority for local Haitians due to competing priorities or simply trying to survive, which makes environmental conservation, restoration, awareness raising and law enforcement challenging.
- **International responses:** Humanitarian aid typically does not integrate climate and environmental challenges, and has even fewer linkages to building long-term peace and security. However, there is an increasing awareness of the need to do so, and some UN agencies and international NGOs have been working towards adding an explicit climate and peacebuilding lens to their work. Climate finance is reaching Haiti, but the amounts are nowhere near sufficient. There is a particular gap in funding steered towards helping people adapt.
- **Local responses:** The first responders after disasters strike have typically been neighbours, family, friends, fellow churchgoers and grassroots organisations, often focused on finding methods for adaptation and recovery. Haitian community-based and civil society organisations work towards restoring and protecting the natural environment, especially through reforestation and conservation projects, but seldom draw clear linkages between climate and peacebuilding.



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Recommendations for policy makers

Addressing the complex and multidimensional challenges that Haiti is facing – climate, environmental, security, political, economic and humanitarian – requires an explicit focus on climate and peacebuilding, with inclusion at its heart.

Four priority areas of action:



Build a high-level vision through multi-sectoral dialogue. Policy makers should:

- Place climate security as well as the protection and restoration of the **environment at the centre** of all economic, political and social decisions;
- Lay out a plan for **resource allocation** over the next 10–15 years that addresses environmental and climate concerns as a priority, as well as the broader social and economic needs of rural and urban communities in Haiti;
- Design a strategy in such a way that it reflects the **priorities and values of all Haitians**, and take advantage of opportunities for cooperation with regional and international partners.



Decentralise responses and empower local communities. Policy makers should:

- Ensure that responses to the multiple crises that Haiti is facing come **from Haitians themselves**, and that they receive the support they need to implement them;
- Make a more explicit effort to work with Haitians for the **design, implementation and monitoring** and evaluation of integrated approaches that address climate security challenges;
- Approach **Haitians as rights holders** rather than passive recipients of charity, and embed clear mechanisms for recourse and accountability in all initiatives.



Rebuild the link between Haitians and their natural environment. Policy makers should:

- Develop **community-based responses** to environmental management and sustainability that have **nature-based solutions** at their core, including agroecological approaches, afforestation projects, sustainable charcoal production practices, protection of marine resources, effective water management and the creation of green jobs;
- Focus on **inclusivity**, looking to build the capacity and empowering Haitian **youth, women and other marginalised people**.



Increase and target funding to address climate security challenges. Multilateral and bilateral donors should:

- Request proposals for projects that intentionally deliver climate and security benefits and ensure that they are informed by **conflict- and climate-sensitive analysis**, are locally-led and bring together a diverse range of stakeholders;
- Coordinate between and within donors to **avoid duplication of efforts and dispersion of funds**;
- Put in place **contingency mechanisms** to ensure flexibility and adaptability to respond to deteriorating security conditions and governance challenges.



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