

HAITI: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF VULNERABLE WOMEN IN EARTHQUAKE-AFFECTED AREAS

United Nations Development Programme
United Nations Capital Development Fund

POVERTY REDUCTION AND MDG ACHIEVEMENT



Photo by Eskinder Debebe/UN Photo

Background

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. It ranks 149th of 182 countries in the 2009 Human Development Index (HDI), with 54% of the population living on less than US\$ 1 per day and 78% on less than US\$ 2. It suffers the highest rate of HIV/AIDS prevalence (2.2% of the population) outside sub-Saharan Africa. The earthquake in January 2010 created new challenges. It killed over 220,000 people and devastated the capital city of Port-au-Prince, causing damages and losses estimated at US\$ 8 billion. The latest data reports that 1.3 million people are still living in temporary shelters in the Port-au Prince metropolitan area and, most recently, a cholera outbreak is imposing additional challenges.

The earthquake extensively affected already weak micro, small and mid-sized enterprises, leading to permanent losses of assets, livelihoods and employment in urban and rural areas, aggravating a chronic reality for the Haitian economy, and making it even more difficult to establish strategic economic sectors that could boost economic growth and improve human development. With the formal economic sector severely affected and only just starting to show signs of recovery, the disaster has also increased the already preponderant role of the informal sector.

The burdens of the natural disaster and the lack of opportunities have

affected women especially hard. Women head more than 40% of the households and provide about 90% of care, typically without pay, training or external support. The disaster also has substantially exacerbated the economic problems that existed before the earthquake; this includes the feminization of poverty, for example, in a context where, across all productive sectors, women's salaries are only half that of men. Women also face greater obstacles in securing access to land, financing and skills training.

Haiti's finance sector has historically been small and fragile. Although the country has a functioning and a relatively vibrant microfinance sector, the earthquake struck hard at this incipient effort by destroying infrastructure and causing higher default rates. Consequently, women are finding it even more difficult to obtain microcredit. Therefore, vulnerable populations are prevented from getting the capital required to generate livelihoods and micro-enterprises.

MDG Localization and Local Development Programmes

Since the earthquake struck, Haiti has become a priority country for the international community. Government delegations, UN agencies and NGOs provided humanitarian assistance, distributed food and goods to IDP camps, and delivered medical support and emergency services. Logistical capacity has also been increased to ensure that aid is properly delivered.



Photo by UNDP

UNDP has been playing a key role in the response to the crisis in Haiti. Job creation is a priority for all UNDP programmes in the country; jobs will offer new opportunities for economic advancement, enable Haitians to cover their basic needs, and rehabilitate basic infrastructure. Since the start of the programme on 20 January 2010, over 160,000 people (40% women) have been employed or were employed as of 27 August 2010. Particularly important have been efforts to foster economic empowerment of vulnerable women in the Port-au-Prince area through the creation of microenterprises and the promotion of women's formal employment. The project helps vulnerable women, including victims of gender-based violence, by providing the means and incentives for social and economic engagement and reinsertion through holistic approaches that ultimately address women's social and economic vulnerability. Given the spillover effect of gender-specific interventions, the project will also help the immediate families of the beneficiaries, including children and the elderly, to obtain food, health care and education.

UNDP is committed to contributing toward the achievements of sustainable alternatives for poverty reduction (MDG 1) and gender empowerment (MDG 3) in Haiti. The economic empowerment of women has demonstrably improved the living conditions of their families, including children, affording them greater access to health, education and food. The project complements other ongoing projects, such as those of UNICEF and Medecins du Monde that deal with gender-based violence and UNDP's own ongoing programmes that focus on the generation of livelihoods for vulnerable groups.

Opportunities for Scaling Up

In the coming years, UNDP will increasingly focus on the development of sustainable livelihoods and the economic recovery of the affected areas in an effort to ensure a smooth transition from humanitarian relief activities to recovery and development interventions. This is consistent with the government's emphasis on full recovery and development and in line with the UN Integrated Strategic Framework (ISF), which foresees December 2011 as a turning point in long-term reconstruction efforts.

By conducting proper feasibility studies, pertinent training, and professional technical assistance, the economic empowerment project will cultivate linkages with formal employment sectors, including with employers' associations and community-based groups, to maximize the impact that access to microfinance may have in overcoming poverty. Moreover, the effort will contribute toward the challenge of consolidating strategic economic sectors in Haiti.

In the medium term, the project's approach can be replicated and scaled up in other areas of the Port-au-Prince urban agglomeration. To this end, the project will be closely monitored and the lessons learned will be used to revise and refine the strategy. As lessons are gathered, further local-to-local scaling up will be implemented in partnership with the relevant municipalities and local governments. As human and infrastructure losses have severely affected the central government, the municipalities have been playing a key role in defining their own development strategies. This is promising, as local governments have a long history of partnering with UNDP and UNCDF through the project that supports local governments in the northeastern region.