

Event Summary Note

Conflict, Displacement, and Health in Haiti

The ongoing crisis in Haiti began with a series of attacks on February 29th, 2024. Still, the country has had its fair share of internal turmoil in recent history. In 2010, an earthquake devastated its main cities, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and unleashing a staggering humanitarian crisis. Political instability and poverty have brought several waves of violence in 2018 and then in 2021 after the assassination of the sitting president, Jovenel Moïse. The resulting political vacuum has exacerbated the power struggle amongst local gangs, with intense violence spilling into the civilian population. Assaults on hospitals, financial institutions, police stations, and critical transportation routes have caused large-scale displacement and have brought the country's food and health systems to the brink of collapse.

Dr. Natalie Colas, Medical Director of St. Luke Hospital in Port-Au-Prince, narrates a dire situation where employees face an ongoing threat to their lives. Out of the five health facilities operating in the capital, one has been closed for two months as gangs restrict access. The kidnapping of one of its employees triggered the closure of one of the leading centers for women's health, and there is currently no facility to house TB patients. Amongst the many moving fronts that require Dr. Colas's immediate attention, procuring medical resources and keeping her staff safe head the list. The staff at St. Luke Hospital has started doing 24-hour shifts to reduce the number of commutes, as well as instituted transport and guest housing to accommodate personnel unable to return home. Although the emergency department is still running 24/7, the lack of a transparent supply chain for medicines threatens the hospital's ability to keep running in the following days.

This grim outlook is complicated by the fact that according to Sandra Pellegrini, a regional specialist with Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Projection (ACLED), the severity of the violence has intensified, resulting in more deaths per attack. Although the different armed groups are diversifying and expanding their territorial reach by attempting to control mobility corridors, including offshore ones, the main focal points for violence continue to be the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, including Cité-Soleil, Pétion-Ville, and Kenscoff. Here, the instrumentalization of civilians is evident by the fact that nearly half of the recorded deaths are the result of targeted attacks on civilians by armed groups, and another quarter stemming from clashes between these groups and state forces. Kidnappings as a source of funding have increased, as well as sexual violence as a weapon of war, which often goes unreported. As the government struggles to control the situation, vigilante violence has spiked since 2023, and Sandra warns us as new gangs emerge and fragmentation increases, conflict resolution becomes more challenging.

Xavier Vollenweider, Director of Mobile Data Partnerships at the Flowminder Foundation, discussed their collaboration with Digicel to analyze human displacement across Haiti. Their efforts, overseen by members of civil society and an Ethics and Governance Advisory, reveal complex mobility patterns shaped by the country's volatile situation. Port-au-Prince mobility network, known for its extensive connectivity, now clusters around the west area of the city,

likely due to reduced mobility amid escalating violence. Despite deriving these data from a single network operator, Flowminder's analyses give decision-makers and organizations a bird's-eye view of the situation. Anonymized, aggregated data collected and processed by Xavier's team is now accessible on their platform (see Resources).

There are several ideas about how the situation in Haiti got to this point. Marie-Rose Murphy calls our attention to the fact that most decisions about Haiti's future are being made outside of Haiti and argues that this should hint at the root of the problem. Marie-Rose is the Co-Founder & Board President of Fondation Communautaire Haitienne-Espwa/The Haiti Community Foundation & ESPWA, Inc., an organization with a strong focus on localization and long-term community governance. She astutely points out that it is easier to control a weekly governed country than a strongly governed one, and given how resource-rich Haiti is, this comment reframes the geopolitical interests of international actors. The only thing that hasn't been tried, she argues, is to let Haitians lead themselves, in part by leaving aside the infantilization of Haitian community leaders. When asked what the role and responsibility of international NGOs should be, she points out that as international NGOs mediate the flow of aid, less of that aid gets to local organizations, and more dependence on foreign actors is created. Capacity would be built much faster if "you just gave us the money" _Haiti allowed these capacities to develop locally.

Resources:

Flowminder's mobility dashboard: <https://haiti.mobility-dashboard.org/>