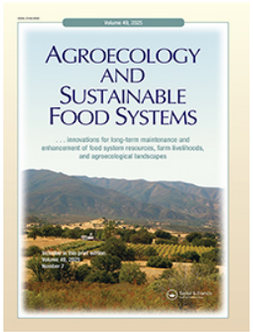

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The problem with food security assessments and a case for food sovereignty evaluative tools: comparing food security and food sovereignty assessments in Haiti

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we compare food security assessments from the World Food Programme, the Global Food Cluster, and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification that inform Haitian food policy and service provisioning with the results from a food sovereignty assessment conducted in Haiti's North Department in 2024. We ultimately argue that food sovereignty evaluative tools can illuminate much that food security reports often overlook, including the significance of land access to food security, insights into gendered food insecurity, the relationships between food security health and mental health, localized experiences of climate change, and the impacts of economic policies on food culture.

KEYWORDS

Food systems; food security; food sovereignty; assessments; responsible production and consumption

Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 2: Zero hunger; SDG 3: Good health and well-being

Introduction: questioning food security evaluations in Haiti

In the past five years, Haiti's poverty and food insecurity have worsened significantly. In 2023, Haiti ranked 158th of 193 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2024), and Haiti has a Global Hunger Index Score of 31.1, signaling "serious levels of hunger" (Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe 2023). Hunger in Haiti is more severe than in Afghanistan, North Korea, or the Democratic Republic of Congo (Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe 2023), with 70 per cent of Haitian households suffering insufficient food consumption (Food Security Cluster 2024). In 2024, nearly 5 million people – almost half the population – were in a state of acute food insecurity, and 33 per cent were in an "emergency" food situation, a ranking the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) indicates is just before catastrophe (Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe 2023; IPC 2024). Supports and programs that have helped many in the past have also deteriorated such that past gains in poverty reduction are all but undone: since 2020, two-thirds of Haitian households have suffered income reductions, and

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remittances and support from NGOs, family, and friends are all down (World Bank Group 2024).

There are multiple drivers of Haiti's current crisis[1]. Most recently is gang violence, which has made life unmanageable not just for urbanites but for rural dwellers in many departments where insecurity has spread. To give some perspective on the severity of the crisis, the number of violent incidents more than doubled in the summer of 2024, and incidents became more lethal (ACLED 2024). The rampant violence in Port-au-Prince has been described as "cataclysmic" (United Nations 2024) and "horrifying" (Amnesty International 2024), with one United Nations expert on Haitian human rights saying, "Killings, torture, disappearances, kidnapping, it's on a scale I've never seen before" (Rivers 2024). Roadblocks, the control of whole neighborhoods by gangs and acts of violence and terror have radically reduced people's mobility, disrupting livelihoods and undermining food distribution systems. This, along with inflation and the contraction of the economy, has entailed that Haiti's hunger levels in 2024 were the worst ever recorded (WFP 2024), leading to what some call "Haiti's worst hunger crisis in history" (Taylor 2023), with over a million people "a step away from famine" (UN News 2024).

Despite the contemporary prevalence of food insecurity in the capital, Port-au-Prince, food insecurity has historically been concentrated in rural Haiti, where 45 per cent of the population still lives. Amid the recent violence, there has been a mass exodus from the capital, with estimates that more than half a million people have been forcibly displaced: this movement to the countryside adds pressure to the already limited resources of rural households (Reliefweb 2024). In addition to acute crises, the chronic struggles of rural producers (lack of support from the state, structural adjustment policies which undermined national food production and deepened food import dependence, the absence of irrigation systems, inadequate transportation and food storage facilities, and limited access to basic services) paired with the persistent impacts of climate change (extreme weather, erratic rainfall, and inconsistent growing seasons) are exacerbating food insecurity. And yet, despite all of this, Haitian agriculture remains one of the most significant sources of income and food in the country, contributing to one-quarter of Haiti's GDP (Berman and Kuperberg 2024; World Bank Group 2023).

There is a real need to respond to acute food insecurity in Haiti's contemporary crisis, and foreign groups are largely leading this response. But the foreign and bilateral organizations have a reputation for the misuse and misdirection of aid and inappropriate responses to emergencies (Abi-Habib 2021; Edmonds 2013; Kushner 2019; Ramachandran and Walz 2015; Schuller 2016), with many calling the history of international engagement in Haiti "brutal" (Gutman 2024), "ugly" (Sagás 2024), and an example of "foreign meddling" (The Economist 2022; Pierre 2024). NGOs have been responsible for the lion's share of service provisioning for decades, including food aid and

food security responses (Guillaume et al. 2023; Schuller 2017). These responses are largely informed by food security assessments, which offer important data on food insecurity but also have significant shortcomings, particularly in that they fail to explore rural dynamics and community experiences of food security challenges and community-articulated solutions. As many have noted, there remains a persistent need to understand and take seriously the experiences and struggles of the rural poor, including the food sovereignty aspirations that have been articulated by civil society and peasant organizations for over a decade (Daniels 2022; Haiti Libre 2013; La Vía Campesina 2010; Metzker 2013; PAPDA 2021; Steckley and Weis 2017).

In the past two decades, scholars and communities have begun to develop a range of food sovereignty evaluative tools to explore local food systems contexts and the dietary and livelihood needs and desires of people on the ground (Binimelis et al. 2014; García-Sempere et al. 2019; Heckelman and Wittman 2015; Levkoe and Blay-Palmer 2018; Levkoe and Sheedy 2019; Ruiz-Almeida and Rivera-Ferre 2019; Simón Reardon and Pérez 2010; Vergara-Romero, Jimber-Del-Río, and Márquez-Sánchez 2022). In this paper, we contribute to this research by exploring the results of a community-based food sovereignty assessment developed by a team of Haitian community partners ($n = 30$) and Haitian and Canadian researchers ($n = 6$) piloted in Northern Haiti in June–August 2024 and compare it with food security assessment reports from the Global Food Security Cluster's Trimester Bulletin (April–June 2024), the World Food Programme's (WFP) Food Security Analysis (July 2024), and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Food Insecurity Analysis (March–June 2024). We compare the outputs of each, highlight the unique contributions of the food sovereignty tool, and shed light on how food sovereignty approaches might enhance food systems assessments in Haiti and beyond.

Literature review: food security and sovereignty assessments

Food security is said to be achieved "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 1996), and includes four core "pillars:" access, availability, utilization and stability (Burchi and De Muro 2016; Coates 2013; FAO 1996; Jones et al. 2013; Scicchitano 2019). But, food security assessments and indicators also vary: there is no consensus on what indicators or methodologies should be applied, and "no existing measures assess all four pillars of food security" (Calloway et al. 2023, 2). Scholars tell us that contemporary food security indicators tend to be geared toward assessing the *access* pillar and argue that understanding contemporary food systems challenges requires exploring "broader dynamics that affect hunger and malnutrition, including widening

food system inequalities characterized by uneven power dynamics and worsening global climate and ecological crises" (Clapp et al. 2022, 1), including experience-based indicators and food consumption practices (Clapp et al. 2022; Manikas, Ali, and Sundarakani 2023). Similarly, in 2016, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems called on researchers, states, and communities to develop new food systems indicators that would better address social justice, ecological health and democratic control in food and agricultural systems (IPES-FOOD 2016).

While some food security definitions and metrics have evolved to include more socio-economic indicators about food security, assessments often still have gaps (Burchi and De Muro 2016; Hospes and Brons 2016; Steckley et al. 2024). To illustrate, food security assessments tend not to discuss structural factors that impact food insecurity, including land and environmental resource distribution, labor, and livelihood relations, terms of trade and agricultural policies, traditional food cultures, and gendered experiences of food production and provisioning Carney (2012), Burchi and De Muro (2016), Hospes and Brons (2016), Steckley et al. (2024) Steckley (2024b). The lack of attention to the structural causes of unequal food systems has led some to conclude that food security approaches and assessments align with and bolster neoliberal ideologies (Otero, Pechlaner, and Gürcan 2013; Wald and Hill 2016). The principal ambition, to provide enough food for all, can entail supporting cheap food imports, trade liberalization (which often undermines domestic production), and offering the lowest cost foods, which may not align with local food cultures, sound nutrition, or community goals of self-sufficiency. Because of this, conceptualizing food systems and assessments through the lens of food sovereignty offers important possibilities.

In concrete terms, food sovereignty is a conceptual framework coined in 1996 by the global peasant movement La Via Campesina, which calls for "the right of populations to define their agricultural and food policy" and recognizes "the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced using sustainable methods" (Via Campesina 2007). More specifically, food sovereignty is characterized by several key pillars, including redistributive land reform; transparency, democratic control, and gender equity in all food systems decision-making; support for agroecological research that centers low-resource communities and people; and the rights of people to culturally appropriate and diverse food systems, including autonomy in trade policies. Conceptually, food sovereignty is not necessarily at odds with food security but encompasses *more* than a food security paradigm (Clapp 2014; Steckley et al. 2023). Food sovereignty advocates aim to foster more equitable and sustainable farming systems and enhance healthy, culturally appropriate and gender-equitable food systems for consumers. It is within this framing and grounded in these aspirations that food sovereignty assessments, indicators, and evaluative tools have emerged as a way to operationalize the concept of

food sovereignty (Binimelis et al. 2014; García-Sempere et al. 2019; Heckelman and Wittman 2015; Levkoe and Blay-Palmer 2018; Levkoe and Sheedy 2019; Ruiz-Almeida and Rivera-Ferre 2019; Simón Reardon and Pérez 2010; Vergara-Romero, Jimber-Del-Río, and Márquez-Sánchez 2022).

Food sovereignty assessments and indicators have a wider scope and breadth than food security-oriented ones. In the past decade, there has been increasing attention to comparing the discourses and paradigms of food security and food sovereignty (Ballayram and Henry 2023; Jarosz 2014; Murdock and Noll 2015) and developing food sovereignty tools (Blue Bird Jernigan et al. 2021; Levkoe and Blay-Palmer 2018; Martínez et al. 2024; Ruiz-Almeida and Rivera-Ferre 2019), but scholars have yet to compare the outputs of food security and food sovereignty assessments. Food security assessments provide important historical snapshots that document food system vulnerabilities. It is important that they are comprehensive, that they include details about the structural drivers of food insecurity, and that they explore people's lived experiences and inequalities in food consumption. In the ensuing sections, we explore three food security assessments and the results of a food sovereignty assessment conducted in Haiti.

Methodology

Our research team was motivated by the (Government of Haiti's 2018) publication of the National Policy for Food Sovereignty, Food Security and Nutrition (PNSSANH). The PSNSSANH calls for moving beyond food *security* approaches and assessments that have historically focussed on caloric sufficiency and food access and advocates engagement with food *sovereignty*. The PSNSSANH considers broader food systems questions, including how traditional food cultures and pro-peasant agriculture are fundamental to creating healthy, economically and environmentally sustainable, and culturally enriching food systems in Haiti. After multiple workshops, our team collaboratively designed a food sovereignty assessment tool, "A Rapid Food Sovereignty and Health Assessment Tool: Haiti (Steckley et al. 2025)[2] which is available online in English, Kreyòl and French. The main sections include Demographic Information, Food Systems, Land and Resource Access, Community, Food and Health, Food and Power, Food and Environment, Health Inventory, Food Security, Gender, Food Culture, and Future Visions.

This paper compares data retrieved from two sets of qualitative research. The first dataset comes from interviews conducted using A Rapid Food Sovereignty and Health Assessment Tool: Haiti (2025). This novel tool was developed by a team of Canadian and Haitian researchers and community partners ($n = 29$) between 2021 and 2023. The research team that collaborated on this tool and authored this paper include two Canadian-born scholars with over five years of lived experience in Haiti and three scholars who were born

and raised in Haiti and pursued their doctoral degrees in Canada. Community partners included representatives from municipal council offices (CASECS); the Center for Agricultural Production and Development; Heifer International; the Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs of the North; the Dibou Agricultural Cooperative and Movement; the Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP); the Peasant's Mouvement of Acul; the Homeland Women's Organizasyon (OFALAK); the Women's Organization of Petit-Anse (OFEP); the Women's Solidarity Organization (OFASO); the National Coordination of Food Security (CNSA); a Professor at the Université d'État d'Haïti and National Coordinator of Agrisud International; and VETERIMED.

Interviews were conducted between June and July 2024 in Massabièl, which is in the Limbé commune of Haiti's North department (where 97 per cent of participants were born, with one person born in the Artibonite department). Informed consent was received from all participants. Interview participants ($n = 29$, 12 men, and 17 women) were between the ages of 25 and 74 years old, and 90 per cent cited agriculture as their main activity. Interview data was recorded by completing the food sovereignty tool questionnaires by hand and were transcribed into an online version of the tool post-interview to share data with research team members. Data were analyzed manually and included both frequency distribution and the coding of qualitative responses, which was done through meta-theme categorizations that matched the food sovereignty tool sections (see sections noted above).

The data collected from piloting the Rapid Food Sovereignty and Health Assessment Tool: Haiti (2025) was compared with data from three food security assessments conducted around the same time in Haiti: the World Food Programme's Food Security Analysis (July 2024), the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Food Insecurity Analysis (March–June 2024), and the Global Food Security Cluster's Trimester Bulletin (April–June 2024)[3]. The food security reports selected for analysis were chosen in part because they reflect the most prominent and influential organizations working on food insecurity in Haiti. To illustrate, the IPC food security classification is among the most reputable in the world and is "the principal source of information informing high-level and strategic decisions on acute food insecurity at country, regional and global levels" (FAO 2022, iii). It is also important that the methodologies that inform these assessments are not model-based approaches but consultative and rely on expert interpreters who gather and analyze data to make assessments, a process more akin to researchers and practitioners engaged in community-based food sovereignty tools (Jones et al. 2013). The IPC is a partnership of 15 organizations, including The Global Food Security Cluster, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the World Food Programme (WFP), among others.) The Global Food Security Cluster then describes that its indicators follow the standard IPC analytical framework for acute food insecurity. In

both the Global Food Security Cluster Bulletins on Haiti and the IPC's Food Security Assessments, the organizations note that they work closely with Haiti's leading food security body, the Coordination Nationale de la Sécurité Alimentaire (CNSA) (CNSA 2024), and with the World Food Programme4[4]. The IPC Food Security Assessments also detail collaboration with other Haitian ministry offices and various NGOs operating in Haiti, including Concern Worldwide and Save the Children (both also reported on in the Global Food Security Cluster Bulletins, among other NGOs). We note this to illustrate the partnerships and collaborative work that takes place between different actors in the drafting of food security assessments. These three assessments reflect the scope of consistent reporting on Haitian food security. Food security assessments were coded manually based on meta-themes that related to food security and sovereignty. The following sections illustrate how the Global Food Cluster, WFP, and IPC reports align with and diverge from the food sovereignty findings.

Results/discussion: comparing food security and food sovereignty assessments

Food access, availability, stability, and utilization

The three food security assessments we analyzed are valuable in that they offer an overview of the number of people in different stages of food insecurity, provide departmental breakdowns and maps, and detail some causes of food access and availability challenges, including rainfall, and weather; agricultural production challenges; violence and food insecurity; and the limitations or gaps in humanitarian assistance. In addition, the Global Food Cluster Trimestral Bulletin (April–June 2024) reports on the activities of various NGOs[5], including the number of people who received support, the programs, and types of support given, funding requested, received, and spent, and NGO challenges, which are important for understanding humanitarian sources of food access, and food availability. The World Food Programme and the Global Food Cluster also report on the price of an average food basket, which is one important indicator of food access, and the WFP reports on whether these data have improved or worsened since the last report, which is a marker of food stability. Overall, all food security assessments touched on food access, availability, and stability, providing some contextual details on the drivers of food insecurity in certain departments. Of the food security assessments, the IPC report provides the most detail, noting some important "determining factors" of food insecurity, including economic shock and inflation, violence, poor harvests, low levels of humanitarian assistance, and the 2021 earthquake from which many have not recovered. Notably, the Global Food Cluster Bulletin was the only food security assessment to mention the scarcity of agricultural

inputs, the high cost of labor, or the problem of land access for producers as part of Haiti's food security problem, although these were mentioned only in brief.

While the WFP, IPC, and Global Food Cluster explore food access, availability, and stability to some degree, the food sovereignty assessment gave further insights into these dimensions. For example, by including questions about hunger experiences, we learned that roughly two-thirds of participants cut foods or skipped meals in the past month because they did not have enough food, over half reported that their children did not have enough food, and 58 per cent said that a lack of food meant that they did not eat for over a day. These qualitative questions are important measures of household food insecurity and can illuminate vulnerable people within households, extra-economic motivations for food decisions and coping mechanisms: researchers have even shown that people's perceptions and experiences of food insecurity and hunger can be better indicators of food insecurity than other proxy measurements (Kennedy 2003; Kleve et al. 2018; Valerie et al. 2018). Questions about market access and food storage also revealed that 78 per cent of participants had difficulty accessing the nearest food market, 96 per cent lacked a reliable form of transportation, and 93 per cent did not have a safe place to store food after harvesting (for example, a silo or depot). Participants also expressed a range of challenges with access to land, which we explore more below. Together, these findings reflect important coping mechanisms and drivers of food access and availability challenges. Specifically, transportation, distribution, and storage systems operate together to impact food security and exploring these connections reveals structural issues that suggest that investment beyond agriculture and food aid will be important for improving long-term food security in Haiti.

Overall, the food security assessment reports were similar and in line with most national assessments, which tend to emphasize food availability and access (Jones et al. 2013). One noteworthy gap in the food security assessments was the absence of metrics that addressed food utilization[6], which are important for understanding barriers to utilizing food resources to produce a healthy life (Jones et al. 2013). The food sovereignty assessment, though, includes questions about health and disease prevalence (both at the scale of the individual and community) and questions on household and community food distribution, which can illuminate power imbalances and reveal consumption disparities.

Climate

While each of the WFP, Global Food Cluster, and IPC reports mention the challenges of variable rainfall for Haitian agricultural production, climate change was noted only in the Global Food Security report and rather

indirectly[7]. Scholars have emphasized that food security assessments should be broadened to address climate change (Clapp et al. 2022), and in the case of Haiti, the lack of attention to linkages between climate change and food insecurity is a concerning omission given that Haiti ranks third worldwide in the long-term climate risk index (David Eckstein 2021) and 97 per cent of respondents felt climate change was the biggest threat to peasant agriculture. The changing climate was discussed recurrently in interviews, with participants saying, "Climate change is a major problem for the community and has serious consequences," "Because of climate change, we lose harvests," and "Sometimes we have drought, and sometimes flooding. It's unpredictable." There is widespread recognition that climate change is a major barrier to food insecurity in Haiti (Singh and Cohen 2014; Steckley and Steckley 2023) and beyond (Myers et al. 2017; Romanello et al. 2022), and food systems assessments could help reflect this in reporting. Climate change is a trend that will impact food systems functioning into the long future, and the most severe impacts are likely to be felt by those who have contributed very minimally to greenhouse gas emissions. Documenting the persistent impacts of climate change is critical for vulnerable communities, and scholars have argued that reporting on climate as a dimension of food security will strengthen food security policies and will help bring together government actors and the humanitarian sector with civil society (Clapp 2014).

Land and environmental resources

In Haiti and around the world, access to land and water is not only essential to food security, but also community decision-making over these resources can enhance food security and well-being (Childress, Choudhury, and Sanjak 2022; Ibrahim, Hendriks, and Schönfeldt 2023; Jernigan et al. 2021). Access to land is a significant challenge for many peasant producers in Haiti. In the context of Massabièl, 41% of participants said they had difficulty accessing land, with one participant explaining that "The majority of the local population has no access to land." For those with land, many struggle with having very small and often disparate plots: the ownership of several non-contiguous land holdings is indeed quite common in Haiti. At a national level, roughly 50 percent of farmers have less than 1 acre, and only about 20 percent of farmers have more than three acres of land (Joseph et al. 2023). Ownership also largely reflects informal holdings: most rural dwellers have customary, but not legal, rights to their land parcels. In our assessment, informal tenure complicated participants' ability to report on the amount of land that they have. For example, one participant said, "I can't tell you precisely the amount of land I own because the land doesn't have a deed, and we don't have surveyors." Indeed, Haiti does not have a comprehensive land tenure system, and only about 5 percent of land in Haiti is formally registered in the national

land cadastre (Comité Interministériel d' Aménagement du Territoire 2015; The Earth Institute 2012). Insecure tenure can undermine environmentally friendly land management practices, impair disaster and emergency responses to crises, and limit state and humanitarian willingness to invest in large-scale irrigation projects (Dolisca et al. 2007; Lopes 2016; Steckley and Shamsie 2015). Still, land access is highly important to food access and security in Haiti. In our assessment, 62 per cent of participants suggested that they rely on their land as their primary source of food provisioning. This context suggests that the focus of food security assessments on food prices, though important, may not reflect the lion's share of food access challenges. Indeed, only 23 per cent of participants said that their main food source came from food purchases. The high dependence on subsistence agriculture and food sharing illustrates that access to land, water, and agricultural resources is paramount to food security. Yet, 96 per cent of participants expressed they did not have irrigated land, emphasizing that this severely hampers production.

Qualitative questions also revealed a range of other production challenges, like insects, drought, and flooding, and 93 per cent of participants said they have experienced not being able to plant because of a lack of resources, including things like seeds and fertilizer. While some food security assessments briefly mention insufficient agricultural inputs, access to land, irrigation, and production challenges remain mostly unexplored in food security assessments. Understanding the agricultural challenges and goals of producers, including details about land ownership and access, irrigation access, and food sources, should be central to food security reports, but these are all absent from the food security assessments that we analyzed.

Gender

Scholars have long illustrated that gender is a major determinant of food security and nutrition, including in Haiti (Duvivier et al. 2024; FAO 2024; Manandhar et al. 2018; Steckley et al. 2022). Researchers and practitioners have also emphasized that gender-aggregated data and research on gender inequality are sorely needed in Haiti and emphasized the need to mainstream gender in data collection, including research on food security and nutrition (McCullough, Zuckerman, and Van Aanen 2018; Steckley et al. 2022; UN Women Count 2022). Yet none of the food security assessments analyzed provide data on gendered food insecurity. The food sovereignty assessment, however, reveals that men tend to be prioritized for food in many households. For example, participants said,

- "I give more meat to my husband"
- "In my family, my husband receives more food."
- "Of course, for food, it's men who have priority."

- "Men eat before everyone else and get more food. After, it's the children. Women eat last."

The food sovereignty assessment also probes into individual and community dietary habits, household food distribution, and land ownership and inheritance practices, themes that are not covered in standard food security assessments but that scholars have emphasized significantly impact gendered food security and nutrition (Ibrahim, Hendriks, and Schönfeldt 2023; Olanike Kehinde et al. 2021; Rehman, Ping, and Razzaq 2019). Indeed, 68 per cent of participants indicated that men are prioritized for land inheritance, and the prevalence of anemia (a gendered illness related to food insecurity) was much higher in women, with 12 women and two men reporting anemia[8]. The food sovereignty assessment also asks about land ownership and access, questions which, if applied in larger-scale assessments, could provide important insights into the connections between land tenure, food security, and gender. If incorporated at a larger scale and with more frequent analyses (as is done by the WFP, IPC, and Global Food Cluster), questions about individual and household dietary practices and food distribution, and gendered land access and ownership could illuminate national disparities that are not possible to identify from current food security assessments.

Health and mental health

While none of the food security assessments mentioned health or mental health, both are included in the food sovereignty assessment (Steckley et al. 2024), and our results offered some important findings. Specifically, over 30 per cent of respondents self-reported as underweight, and health inventory questions revealed concerns about the prevalence of typhoid and *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) in the community, both food and water-related illnesses that suggest links between food insecurity and food safety. Participants also expressed concerns about a range of diseases: high blood pressure, anemia, and heart disease, all diet-related diseases. Notably, over 55 per cent of participants said that the food they eat does not address their health needs, and 80 per cent expressed concern that community health problems were exacerbated by a lack of healthy food. While the very definition of food security includes the stipulation that food should provide "an active and healthy life" (FAO 1996), few food security metrics assess health or probe the connections between diet and health (Jones et al. 2013). As Barrett (2010), 827) emphasizes, "measurement drives diagnosis and response," and including specific health metrics in food systems assessments has the potential to improve more holistic and contextually appropriate responses. Interviewee health concerns also highlight connections between individual health and broader food systems, particularly food safety. Scholars tell us that effective

food security policies and programming demand intersectoral collaboration on food safety: the ability of states, the private sector, and humanitarian organizations to deliver food security hinges on attention to food distribution, storage, and transportation systems (King et al. 2017), and "leaders in food security should be aware of food safety" (Uyttendaele, De Boeck, and Jacxsens 2016, 1). Yet, food safety and health concerns are not reported on common food security assessments in Haiti, and indeed, scholars tell us that food safety is often absent from food security metrics more broadly (Jones et al. 2013).

In addition to health concerns that the food sovereignty assessment unveiled were insights into mental health. Scholars emphasize that food insecurity strongly impacts mental health and is associated with anxiety, depression and suicide ideation (Jones 2017; Pourmotabbed et al. 2020; Saputra et al. 2024; Trudell et al. 2021). In our study, nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 per cent) reported that they often feel *dekouraje*[9] [discouraged/depressed] and find life stressful (82 per cent), with 57 per cent describing that they experience extreme stress. In large measure, feelings of stress were related to insecure land tenure, land grabbing, and the inability to cultivate land because of weather volatility or lack of income. These connections are novel and illustrate that relationships between mental health and food often go beyond food *security*. Specifically, mental health issues are not only induced by insufficient food, but food *system* challenges, including the loss or lack of control over land and environmental resources, also have serious mental health ramifications. This illustrates political and structural factors – like insecure land tenure – are important determinants of food insecurity and mental health and should be acknowledged and documented in food systems assessments. Importantly, scholars have shown that agricultural assets, including land ownership and access, are not only important buffers against food and nutritional security but can also protect against poor mental health (Lachaud et al. 2020; Meek and Khadse 2022; Minkoff-Zern et al. 2024; Wolff 2021). These are themes that traditional food security assessments do not address and illustrate a need for more holistic food systems reporting, including the inclusion of data related to connections between food security and mental health.

Food culture

Traditional foods are important components of food security, community cohesion and pride in many contexts (Ghosh, Meyer-Rochow, and Jung 2023; Maudrie et al. 2021; Muhialdin et al. 2021; Richmond et al. 2021), including in Haiti (Steckley 2024). There is also ample evidence that the paradigm of food security in Haiti has contributed to culturally inappropriate food aid Schwartz (2015); Hsu and Schuller (2020); Steckley et al. (2022); Charles (2024). Still, the food security assessments that we analyzed

did not explore food culture, traditional food consumption, or food preferences. In the food sovereignty assessment, two-thirds of participants were concerned that food traditions had been lost in their community, and 61 per cent of participants expressed that their community wanted to preserve traditional foods. In concrete terms participants mentioned traditional foods like yams, plantains, taro, maize, manioc, sweet potatoes, beans, breadfruit, rice, and mangoes, but also traditional dishes that needed to be prepared like *tchaka* [a stew made from maize, beans, pumpkin and meat], *tchòk* [Bluggoe banana], *tonmtonm* [a dish based on mashed breadfruit], *mayi moulen* [a savory cornmeal-style porridge], *bouyon* [stew], *sòs kalalou* [okra sauce], *mousa* [a dish based on mashed cassava and pigeon peas], *doukounou* [sweet cornmeal pudding], and *banbocha/kasav* [cassava flatbread]. Respondents said things like, "We continue to work the land because we want to protect traditional foods" and "We want to preserve our cultural foods, it's our identity." Many (25 per cent) reported that they cannot eat traditional food as much as they would like, with some saying they are too expensive, but many cited the decline of traditional food availability because of the rise of cheap food imports. The food sovereignty assessment inclusion of questions related to food culture and dietary aspirations sheds light on how food culture is entangled in political and economic processes, revealing a relationship between trade policies, livelihoods and traditional food erosion. In this sense, research on traditional foods and cultural food preferences could be an important contribution to food systems analysis that could encourage humanitarian organizations to support local food systems and local food provisioning.

Food systems aid

While the Food Cluster Bulletin offered some information about food and agricultural programs and food aid distribution, the food sovereignty assessment illuminated community perceptions of foreign aid, with a focus on food aid. Specifically, 96 per cent of participants said that food provided by NGOs was neither healthy nor suited to people in their community. Participants said, "They contain chemicals that are harmful to your health," and "I heard that the food donated by NGOs in other places is not of good quality." Respondents also expressed that to improve their food situation, they hope for but have not received support for their agricultural production, with one participant saying, "There is no support for cultivating land. We work at the mercy of nature." Probing perceptions of food aid and asking qualitative questions about people's experiences can provide significant insights into how food distribution and agricultural assistance might better serve communities and correspond to expressed needs. Particularly in the context of Haiti, where opinions of foreign actors and NGOs tend to be low, there is a need for food security

programming to be evaluated by people themselves and for food security reporting to attend to local perceptions of food aid and food systems services.

Historical context

As noted above, the food security assessments that we analyzed provided some context about the contemporary drivers of food security, including gangs, insecurity and poor rainfall. Yet, none grappled with the linkages between historical political-economic and colonial contexts and contemporary food insecurity, though scholars emphasize that structural factors, including racism, structural adjustment, and histories of food aid, reveal important root causes of food insecurity (FAO 1997; Lindberg et al. 2023; Odoms-Young and Bruce 2018; Payán et al. 2021). In the context of Haiti, the impact of colonization, persistent race and class hierarchies, food dumping, trade liberalization, and the influx of food imports have been well documented, yet the impact of food imports and preferences for traditional foods is often overlooked (Cohen 2024; McGuigan 2006; Singh and Cohen 2014; Steckley 2015; Steckley and Weis 2016). The food sovereignty assessment considers these structural determinants of food insecurity and includes questions about social taboos or stigma around certain foods, any historical examples that have disrupted food systems, and whether and how the food systems and diets have changed over the years. These questions revealed that participants were very concerned about food imports. For example, participants said:

- "Imported foods are transforming our food system and represent a real threat to local production. Local products have declined considerably."
- "Imported products are changing our food and causing diseases like hypertension and diabetes."
- "Because of customs policies, the Haitian market is invaded with foreign products. This has caused changes in our community food system. Local products cannot compete with those from abroad."

In large measure, participants expressed that foreign food aid is often inappropriate and does not meet the needs or desires of communities. But nearly roughly 40 per cent of interviewees also revealed concerns with food discrimination, particularly toward local "peasant" foods. And food stigma impacts dietary preferences in important ways, with participants saying things like:

- "I won't eat millet because of people who say it is food for chickens."
- "I often eat imported products because people make denigrating comments about local foods."
- "Because of the negative way people talk about local foods, our kids don't want to eat them."

The social taboos and discrimination of rural, peasant food in Haiti have been documented (Steckley 2015, 2016): these are insidious and persistent legacies of race-based social hierarchies that undermine rural producers, perpetuate ideologies of inferiority, and are important structural determinants of health and food insecurity in Haiti (Steckley et al. 2022). Yet, discussions of structural causes of food security and historical contexts are absent from contemporary food security reports in Haiti. Documenting the root causes of food insecurity in Haiti must include attention to Haiti's colonial context, structural adjustment and humanitarian intervention: assessing contemporary food insecurity without attention to these represents a glaring omission. In Haiti and food systems assessments more broadly, attention to historical contexts, including how histories of colonization and development policies impact contemporary food insecurity, may help to bridge understandings between foreign actors and local populations, ensure that emerging leaders can explore the context from which food insecurity emerged, and could improve government and humanitarian responses to food insecurity.

Future visions

Finally, a central part of many food sovereignty assessments is that they encourage communities to share their vision for the future (Bell-Sheeter 2004; Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa 2022; Steckley et al. 2024). It is important to emphasize that none of the food security assessments asked participants how they envisioned improving the food security challenges that they experienced, this is indeed a glaring omission. Scholars have shown that exploring community perceptions of food insecurity and visions for change can enhance food security responses and programming (Moak et al. 2018; Rojo et al. 2022). In our food sovereignty assessment, participants articulated what they needed in clear terms: agricultural support, including support to protect traditional food cultivation, support for seeds and irrigation, agricultural credit, secure access to land, cultural centers, and efforts to build mutual collaboration and solidarity. Many scholars have shown that participatory community-engaged food systems assessments can be extremely valuable, they can enhance understanding of contextual drivers of food insecurity and the complexity of food insecurity, can enhance partnerships between communities and other actors that impact food systems, and can lead to more culturally acceptable and effective interventions (Berger, Sartain, and Klassen 2022; Maudrie et al. 2021). These are compelling reasons for food systems assessments to seek out and report on the experiences, perspectives and ideas for change expressed by people on the ground.

Conclusion

Today, the barriers to food security in Haiti are significant. Peasant organizations and farmers certainly agree that political turmoil and gang violence are

important barriers to food security and sovereignty (Vía Campesina 2024), but there are also other important drivers of food security and complexities with food security experiences that dominant food security assessments often neglect – and have neglected for decades. For example, participants in our study shed light on several important barriers to food security – climate change, gendered food distribution, health and mental health challenges, food safety problems, lack of access to land and water resources, traditional food erosion, and trade and humanitarian policies and programs that perpetuate food import dependence at the detriment of traditional food, among others. As noted, Haitian peasant and civil society organizations have been calling for food sovereignty for over a decade (La Vía Campesina 2010; PAPDA 2021). But there is a growing paradigm shift in Haiti; the values and goals of food sovereignty are now being articulated beyond civil society and the peasantry. In 2018, the Haitian government published the PSNSSANH (Government of Haiti 2018), marking the first time that language and core values of food sovereignty were taken up by the state. In 2023, many NGOs and advocacy organizations issued a joint letter to the US Congress on Haitian food sovereignty, calling for bilateral organizations to realign agricultural assistance in Haiti to "support efforts by local farmers so they can play a leading role in responding to hunger in Haiti" by providing support for irrigation projects, seed saving, land reform and rights, road infrastructure to connect people to markets, helping farmers respond to climate change, and procuring local food for food aid (Amnesty International et al. 2023). The dominant reports based on food security analyses of the IPC, WFP and Global Food Cluster are of value and provide important windows on the severity of food insecurity and some of the drivers, but they have critical gaps that could be improved by better aligning reports with the PSNSSANH, and the visions and experiences of Haitian producers and communities. Insights into the food security experiences and food systems aspirations of Haitians themselves could be crucial to crafting appropriate and effective humanitarian responses to Haiti's contemporary crisis, and long-term food security.

Beyond Haiti, our research illustrates some critical limitations of food security-centric assessments and reporting and highlights the value of food sovereignty evaluative tools. Exploring broader and more complex food systems dynamics has the potential not only to provide a clearer and more comprehensive picture of local food systems, illuminating unique food systems vulnerabilities and people's food and agricultural aspirations, but could also enable policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders, to assess historical drivers of food insecurity, and how they can be improved.

We want to acknowledge that improving food systems assessments by using a food sovereignty framework does not necessarily mean that governments or humanitarian actors will act differently, or that funding or programming will

be directed in ways that align with local interests. Still, beyond our hope that food sovereignty analysis will impact food security programming, food security assessments are important snapshots in time; they are often done multiple times a year and have the potential to be meaningful historical records of food systems vulnerabilities and experiences. Food sovereignty evaluative tools could enhance the quality of these reports and could provide actionable and historical information. One can imagine that trimestral food sovereignty assessments that document, for example, the threat of land grabbing, disproportionate female experiences of hunger, or local calls for traditional food, if recorded year on year, would tell a very different story than standard reporting on food security which tend to merely "document damage" (Rojo et al. 2022). Consistent reporting on food sovereignty could make food system challenges more visible, illustrate their persistence, and give advocates and researchers more data to compel policy makers and foreign actors to do more to support the food systems aspirations of local people.

Notes

1. Though beyond the scope of this paper, the historical drivers of Haiti's contemporary food insecurity are trenchant and far-reaching. As Haitian scholar Michel Rolph Trouillot (1994) emphasizes, the current challenges faced by the Haitian peasantry must be understood in the context of the "nightmare" of their history. For a thorough exploration of Haiti's history, see (Dupuy 1989; Heinl and Heinl 0000), and (James 1964). For discussions of the unique emergence and persistence of Haiti's peasantry, see (Casimir 2020; Steckley and Weis 2017) and (Smith 2001). The U.S. occupation and the Duvalier Dictatorships on rural landscapes and livelihoods are covered brilliantly by (Trouillot 1990). For an examination of food dumping, food import-dependence and the challenges of and resistance to export-oriented agriculture see (Cohen 2013; Steckley and Weis 2016), and (Gros 2008). Finally, for a discussion of how race and class hierarchies impact food production and consumptions in Haiti see Steckley (2015, 2016).
2. For a more detailed overview of the food sovereignty assessment tool, including information on its impetus, development, and an overview of its key sections see Steckley et al. (2024).
3. While an interrogation of the indicators used by the WFP, the IPC and the Global Food Security Cluster is beyond the scope of this paper, for information on the methodologies of these assessments, see: "Protocols of the IPC Technical Manual version 3.1" (IPC Global Partners 2019), the Global Food Cluster's "Food Security and Livelihoods Indicator Handbook" (Food Security Cluster 2020). The World Food Program outlines its methodology in the World Food Programme's Food Security Analysis (July 2024).
4. World Food Programme personnel are listed as contacts on the Global Food Cluster Haiti Bulletins.
5. Notably, roughly half of the content of this Bulletin is reporting on NGOs.
6. Food utilization is often measured through things like illness prevalence, dietary diversity scores and power relations, which illuminates community and household food distribution.
7. The report offered a case study on the Artibonite Department and described a roundtable discussion and presentation from a Director of the Ministry of

Agriculture in which climate change was discussed. Notably, the presenter also said that poor infrastructure and lack of investment were barriers to Haitian agriculture, emphasizing that these could curb the problem of food security, and calling for more livelihood support, the promotion of local seeds, and the development of a community seed bank. These are all in line with food sovereignty but were not discussed in the bulletin beyond reference to the Director's presentation.

8. Anemia is much more prevalent in women than in men in Haiti and is largely related to access to nutrition, with some scholars illustrating a link between gender relations, food distribution and poor female nutrition (Ayoya et al. 2014; Neptune-Anglade 1986; Steckley et al. 2022).
9. In the Haitian context, mental health remains relatively unrecognized and is taboo in many contexts. There is an emerging body of research on assessing mental health challenges in Haiti and scholars note that dekouraje is one word that Haitians use to describe and assess mental health challenges, specifically depression (Galvin et al. 2022; Kaiser et al. 2013). While we are not making claims about the mental health status of those interviewed, we want to emphasize that probing about mental health and including mental health indicators in food systems assessments could shed light on community challenges and needs.

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