

Why is Haiti vulnerable to natural hazards and disasters?

Poor infrastructure, deforestation and failure to prepare for earthquakes and storms put the island at very high risk

Sam Jones

Tuesday 4 October 2016 14.00 BST

Haiti, which is feeling the force of Hurricane Matthew, with winds of 145mph and 3ft of rain, is all too accustomed to natural hazards and disasters.

The Caribbean country is regularly battered by tropical storms and floods and has also been struck by powerful earthquakes.

During the hurricane season eight years ago, Haiti was hit by four storms - Fay, Gustav, Hannah and Ike - which killed more than 800 people and devastated nearly three-quarters of its agricultural land. It also suffered dire flooding in 2002, 2003, 2006 and 2007. In 1963, Hurricane Flora killed 6,000 people in Haiti and Cuba.

In January 2010, a devastating earthquake flattened parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince. It killed at least 90,000 people and displaced more than 1.5 million. In its wake there was a cholera epidemic, unwittingly introduced by UN peacekeepers, which has claimed about 10,000 lives.

Laurent Lamothe, who was Haiti's prime minister between 2012 and 2014, described the earthquake as an Armageddon moment that "literally set us back 50 years".

Despite the huge amount of aid money promised in the aftermath of the disaster, very little of it was channelled through Haitian organisations, leading to accusations that it was badly targeted and did little to help the country recover and prepare for future catastrophes.

It also remains dangerously exposed to environmental threats such as floods and mudslides, because of staggering levels of deforestation. Many people, especially in Port-au-Prince, live in shanty towns whose flimsy huts cling to steep and exposed hillsides.

Its vulnerability to disasters, however, and its ability to cope with them are down to far more than simple geography.

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere and has suffered decades of political instability, corruption and violence, leaving its infrastructure severely compromised.

According to Dr Matthias Garschagen from the United Nations University, the scientific director of the annual World Risk Report, the impact of hazards such as earthquakes and hurricanes depends on everything from planning laws to basic infrastructure.

"The disaster potential we see in Haiti in these very minutes and hours is not only driven by the strength of the hazard, which is very strong of course, but also by the real lack of coping

capacity and the very high fragility and susceptibility within society,” he said.

“We’re talking very basic infrastructure - sanitation, healthcare centres and evacuation shelters.”

Such fundamental provisions, added Garschagen, were only as good as the government institutions supporting them.

“This is where Haiti has its greatest weaknesses: weak institutions, to a certain extent very inefficient institutions, and a high level of corruption so that even the limited resources that are there are not as powerful as they could or should be.”

Earlier this year, the UN’s head of disaster planning said the world’s failure to prepare would have “inconceivably bad” consequences as climate change fuels a huge increase in catastrophic droughts and floods and the humanitarian crises that follow.

In 2015, earthquakes, floods, heatwaves and landslides left 22,773 people dead, affected 98.6 million others and caused \$66.5bn (£47bn) of economic damage (pdf). The international community, however, spends less than 0.5% of the global aid budget on mitigating the risks posed by such hazards.

[More news](#)

Topics

[Haiti Natural disasters and extreme weather](#) [Americas Earthquakes](#) [Flooding](#)
[Hurricane Matthew](#)

[Save for later](#) [Article saved](#)

[Reuse this content](#)