



CHILD ALERT **Haiti**

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Child Alert: Haiti

Survival is the greatest challenge for Haiti's children

In Haiti, it is a major accomplishment for a child to survive long enough to mark his or her first birthday. In fact, 1 of every 14 infants in Haiti never reaches that milestone. Making it through the first year of life, however, does not ensure survival. In no other country in Latin America and the Caribbean - and in only a few in the developing world outside of sub-Saharan Africa - is a child more likely to die between the ages of 1 and 4 than in Haiti. In 2004, of the 58,000 deaths in the region among children in this age group, 11,000 - 19 per cent, or roughly 1 in every 5 - were Haitian. Another 11,000 were Mexican. Yet Mexico also has 19 per cent of the region's births, while Haiti has just 2 per cent.

The disproportionate ratio of child deaths to births in Haiti says much about why this Child Alert has been issued. This disparity should not, and cannot, be allowed to continue. With the election of a new government, there is fresh hope that the plight of Haiti's long-neglected children can begin to change - but only if concerted action is taken now and sustained in the coming years.

Haiti recently elected a new president, René Preval. Along with all the other presidential candidates, Mr. Preval endorsed the *Political Agenda for Children*, a policy paper on social reform for children. The *Agenda* is, in effect, a road map for child development and protection. Beginning with a comprehensive analysis of the situation of Haiti's children, it sets out priorities for improving child and maternal health and educational attainment, reducing HIV/AIDS and protecting children against abuse, exploitation and violence. In addition to outlining the responsibilities of the government and Congress, the plan calls for the active involvement of civil society and the private sector, especially local leaders and parents.

Reaching the targets of the *Agenda* would help spur progress toward the UN Millennium Development Goals - which governments

Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. Haiti has far and away the Western Hemisphere's highest death rate of under-5-year-olds. What can the new, democratically elected government do, with the support of the international community, to change this situation?

agreed to six years ago and which have been largely beyond Haiti's reach, especially in the areas of child survival, immunization and universal primary education. Based on his previous term in office in the late 1990s, Mr. Preval is committed to the MDGs. He recently stated his intention to take children off the streets, and to replace the weapons in their hands with pens and books. But the task he faces is daunting. In addition to its staggering infant and child mortality rates, almost every other major indicator related to child health and development in Haiti is far worse than the regional averages (see Figures).

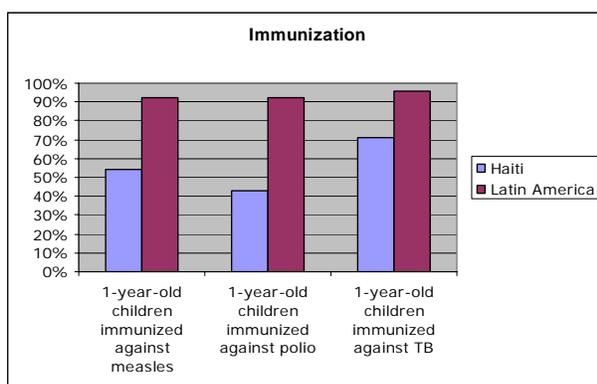
Many Haitian children have no access to basic health services at all. In rural and urban areas alike, cost and distance are barriers to healthcare. Those facilities that exist tend to be poorly situated, understaffed and inadequately supplied. Substandard private health facilities fill the gap between government capacity and public demand.

A major factor in the low survival rate of newborns and infants in Haiti is the lack of widespread immunization. Haitians compensate by having large families, in the expectation - common before the introduction of antibiotics - that a certain number of their children are fated to die of diseases that simply cannot be prevented. In Haiti only 54 per cent of children under the age of one receive vaccinations for measles, compared to over 90 per cent for the rest of Latin America, and 66 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Rates of chronic malnutrition among Haitian children are also high, especially in rural areas. It is estimated that across the country, almost one quarter of all children under the age of five suffers from moderate to severe malnutrition, a

developmental inheritance that can leave children with an intellectual and physical deficit for the rest of their lives. In the Artibonite Valley, the Haitian ‘breadbasket,’ the only hospital in a 60km radius is inundated with cases of malnutrition.

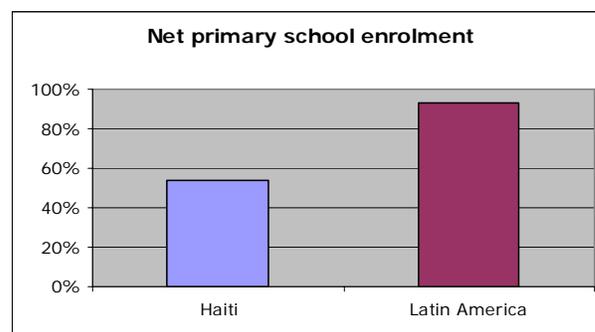
With 2 out of every 3 Haitians living below the national poverty line at the time of the country’s last survey, just obtaining the basic necessities of life, such as clean water to drink and fuel for cooking, is a struggle. Only 71 per cent of the population uses an improved water source, and just 34 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities.



Many children spend hours fetching water from the nearest source, often at the expense of their schooling. Once carried home, the water is not safe until it is boiled and treated with wood or charcoal – scarce resources since centuries of exploitation have left Haiti with just a 3 per cent covering of forest. It is of little surprise, then, that diarrhoea is prevalent, and is a leading cause of mortality and morbidity among children under the age of five. Only 41 percent of children under five who are stricken with diarrhoea receive oral rehydration therapy and continued feeding.

In Cité Saint Martin, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the capital of Port-au-Prince, 60,000 people reside in a square kilometre without waste disposal or toilet facilities. The health risks from contaminated water and the open sewers around them are extremely high. “In Haiti, if a child is thirsty and you give him water to drink, he could easily die from that water,” laments Margarette Albert, an aid worker in the capital’s Bel Air slum.

For parents, education offers the single hope of a life for their children beyond these brutal conditions. Enormous sacrifices are made by many poor families to send their children to school, since the majority of schools charge a fee for each student. Yet the education system, beset by years of underinvestment, strangles even these hopes. Schools in Haiti are largely overcrowded, run-down and barely maintained. Training and resources for teachers are inadequate, and payment of their salaries is irregular at best.

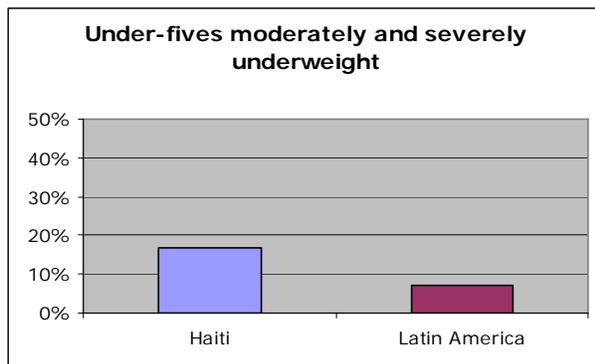


There are other factors that help deny children the right to a basic education. Poverty forces many children to work in the home, or to care for younger children instead of going to school. In rural areas, distance from school and lack of transportation are also constraints. In the cities, the high numbers of orphans, street children and violence are a barrier to school attendance. It is hardly surprising, then, that only 55 per cent of primary-school-age children receive an education; that only 2 per cent finish secondary school, and that the latest estimates show that roughly one-third of youths between 15 and 24 are illiterate.

If there is one common plaudit for the school system, it is that it keeps many children off the streets. The latest estimates suggest that in Port-au-Prince alone there are 2,000 street children living and working on its roads and public squares. Some street children are orphans, others are escapees from violent homes or places of work; and still others have left their impoverished rural communities in search of a better life in the cities. Once there, they survive by begging or doing menial work. Many are sexually exploited. Others do not

survive: Reports place the murder rate of street children in Port-au-Prince at one a week.

Children whose basic needs are unmet and who are unprotected against abuse are easily and forcibly recruited into gangs. Some are coerced into membership; others see gang life as a way to gain food, shelter, protection and prestige. In Haiti's largest cities, armed gangs recruit children to be messengers, to commit crimes, and to fight rival gangs. Refusal to carry out orders means risking punishment. For girls, gangs bring the threat of forced prostitution, or rape. "Young girls are often raped by the men of the opposing gang as a way of reprisal," says Danise, a 22-year old former resident of Cité Soleil, one of the capital's largest slums.



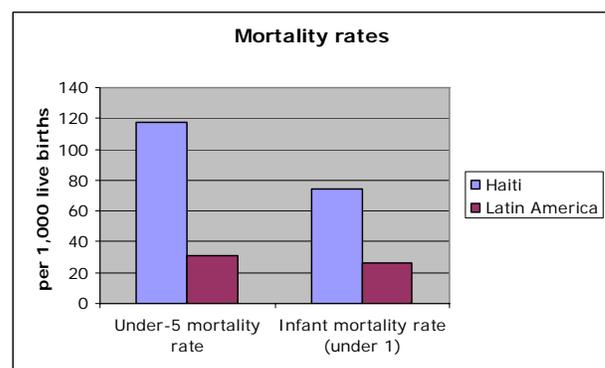
Poverty, destitution and violence foster the conditions that allow children to become excluded and invisible - exploited, neglected, trafficked and abused. It is estimated that more than half the children lack birth registration, without which they are more vulnerable to exclusion from essential services such as healthcare and education, protection from early marriage and labour, and, when they grow up, access to credit and the right to vote. Compared with other countries in the region, Haiti has the highest rate of orphans (children who have lost one or both parents), who account for 16 per cent of the under-18 population.

The problems of child labour, trafficking, and HIV/AIDS, to name but three, are serious. Around 1 in 10 children is engaged in domestic work away from their families. Girls account for three-quarters of these 300,000-plus workers, who have been dubbed *restaveks* (meaning in the Creole dialect "to stay with"). Many poor

parents, who cannot feed or educate their children, allow them to become *restaveks* out of desperation. Families are typically visited by prospective employers or intermediaries who promise that their children will be fed, educated and cared for. But all too often, the reality is that the child is exploited and abused, working long hours on meagre food rations and with limited possibilities of receiving an education.

Celine, 13, and Naki, 12, are two children who were harmed by their employers. Celine was sexually abused and severely burned by the two men who "owned" her. Naki, a small boy with scars on his forehead and chest, was beaten with a rock by the man he worked for. He is now at Foyer L'Escale, a shelter in northern Port-au-Prince for young *restaveks* who have managed to escape abusive employers.

The exploitation of Haiti's children is not confined to the country's borders. Haitian children are kidnapped or trafficked into the neighbouring Dominican Republic. Many parents, despairing of the bleak prospects for their children and believing that migration may offer the only avenue for employment and a better future for them, are tricked into paying for their passage to the Dominican Republic. Again, the reality is often very different from the promise, particularly for girls. Most of them become domestic servants, and some end up in prostitution.



As for HIV/AIDS, a glimmer of hope has emerged for Haiti's children. Though the country's HIV-prevalence rate is by far the highest in the region, and more than 200,000 children have lost one or both parents to the AIDS, recent developments give cause for

cautious optimism. HIV infection among pregnant women fell by half from 1992 to 2003-04 (from 6.2 per cent to 3.1 per cent). The fall was particularly marked in urban areas and among young women aged 15-24, and may be related to behavioural change (the evidence is indicative rather than conclusive). The fact remains, however, that more than 3 per cent of the adult population is infected by HIV, and 5,000 babies are born each year with the infection (of whom just 300 receive appropriate care). Increased prevention initiatives and treatment will be vital to ensure that the corner indeed has been turned.

A future for Haiti's children

Despite their plight, the hopes of children are resilient. Romario, who is 15 and voluntarily attends an open, safe centre for street children where he receives education and has access to leisure says, "If I were President, I would bring all the children on the streets to places where they can go to school and grow."

Whether Mr. Preval and his new government can fulfil these hopes, or even come close, will depend on sound political leadership, continued commitment to children, and increased and sustained support of international donors.

UNICEF believes that the *Political Agenda for Children* represents an essential common platform from which reform can begin — by placing children at the centre of social change. But if Haiti's long neglected children are to have the bright future that is their right, swift and decisive action is needed.

Our thanks to our partners, government counterparts, non-governmental organizations, UN colleagues and Haitian advisors, who assisted in the creation of this report. A particular note of thanks to the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.

For further information on this Child Alert, e-mail childalert@unicef.org