HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVATION INTERVIEW REPORT

The Impact of the 2021 La Soufrière Volcanic Eruption on Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods

Interviewee: Agriculture Officer, North Leeward
Location: Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Interview date: 23 April 2022
Subject: Agricultural damage, government assistance and post-eruption recovery

SECTION 1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Editorial note: This transcript has been edited for clarity, grammar and readability. Repetitions and conversational fillers have been removed while retaining the interviewee's original meaning and testimony.

1. Professional background and responsibilities

Interviewer: Could you introduce yourself, your professional background and your role in the agricultural sector?

Agriculture Officer: I am an agriculturalist by profession, although I consider farming my passion. I love farming. I am now working with the Medicinal Cannabis Authority.

My role in agriculture has involved teaching farmers different farming techniques, providing technical knowledge and helping them improve their agricultural production.

2. Impact of the volcanic eruption

Interviewer: What impact did the La Soufrière eruption have on agriculture in this area?

Agriculture Officer: The agricultural sector on this side of the island was practically wiped out. Both crops and livestock were affected, although a few animals survived.

I would estimate that more than 90% of agriculture in this area was affected, and the damage was severe.

Interviewer: Did this mainly affect Central and North Leeward?

Agriculture Officer: Yes, and also the eastern side of the island.

3. Emergency assistance during the eruption

Interviewer: What was your role during the eruption?

Agriculture Officer: I assisted with distributing animal feed and coordinating the provision of water to livestock.

I remained in the area with my family throughout the eruption. The Ministry supplied commercial animal feed because the grass had been affected by volcanic ash.

A pickup truck carrying water tanks was also sent daily. I accompanied the driver and helped distribute water to animals in the villages and along the roads.

Many people had released their animals, so livestock were wandering through the streets and villages. Whenever we encountered animals, we stopped to provide water.

4. Post-eruption agricultural assessments

Interviewer: What was your role in assessing agricultural damage after the eruption?

Agriculture Officer: Although I was primarily working with medicinal cannabis farmers, I was also asked to assist with general crop assessments following the eruption.

We assessed farms from Romans Hill down to Malvern Woods, including areas beyond Richmond. The assessment took approximately two weeks.

The damage was particularly severe in parts of Central Leeward, although areas further south, including Vermont and South Leeward, were also affected.

The purpose of the assessments was to establish the extent of agricultural damage and calculate its financial value.

Interviewer: Did these assessments help farmers receive assistance?

Agriculture Officer: The assessments provided information that enabled the Government to establish the value of the damage and seek funding from international agencies.

However, the responsibility for providing assistance was ultimately left to the Government.

5. Government assistance and recovery support

Interviewer: What assistance did farmers receive after the eruption?

Agriculture Officer: Some farmers received financial assistance. The payments were intended to be monthly, although sometimes they were distributed in two-month periods.

Farmers also received other forms of assistance, including water tanks and seeds provided through donor agencies.

Interviewer: Do you believe the assistance was sufficient?

Agriculture Officer: In my personal opinion, it was not sufficient. Farmers did not receive enough assistance, particularly when compared with other sectors.

Many farmers are still struggling to recover.

Even when farmers received seeds and attempted to replant, the volcanic ash continued to affect agricultural production. Some farmers had to remove the ash before planting, while seedlings planted directly into ash-affected soil often died.

It remains a struggle for farmers to restore their livelihoods.

6. Concerns about the distribution of assistance

Interviewer: Why do you think agriculture did not receive as much assistance as other sectors?

Agriculture Officer: I cannot really answer that question. I think it may have been a matter of government priorities.

I do not know how resources were distributed or why certain decisions were made. Ultimately, these are government policy decisions.

However, I had hoped that farmers would receive more assistance.

Even more than a year after the eruption, there were still water tanks that had not been distributed.

Interviewer: Why were these tanks still being kept in storage?

Agriculture Officer: I really do not know. Farmers have continually been asking for assistance, but the tanks are still there. I do not know what the hold-up is, but I genuinely wish farmers could receive more help.

7. Wider challenges facing farmers

Interviewer: Do you think agriculture is generally underfunded, even beyond the effects of the eruption?

Agriculture Officer: A lot more could be done to support farmers.

For example, obtaining a farmer's identification card is difficult. The criteria are too strict, and farmers are required to provide too many documents.

There are also very few incentives attached to having a farmer's ID. Farmers often pay the same prices for fertiliser, seeds and machinery regardless of whether they have an identification card.

Interviewer: Do you think more agricultural subsidies are needed?

Agriculture Officer: Yes. Much more could be done to subsidise agriculture.

Fertiliser is sometimes subsidised, and farmers importing machinery can apply for concessions ranging from 0% to 75%, depending on the age of the machinery.

However, more support is needed beyond these measures.

Even the roads leading to farms are a problem. Much more needs to be done to improve agricultural access roads.

8. Long-term impacts of the eruption

Interviewer: What would you say are the long-term impacts of the eruption, both positive and negative?

Agriculture Officer: One of the biggest negative impacts is the amount of volcanic ash remaining in the soil. It continues to affect plants and makes agricultural production difficult.

Some people claim that volcanic ash contains minerals that can benefit plants, but I cannot identify any significant positive effects from a policy perspective.

Many farmers also lost their livestock and have not yet been able to replace their animals. They are effectively having to start from zero.

There are many negative impacts, and farmers continue to struggle.

9. Closing comments

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Agriculture Officer: Agriculture needs much more support.

Although tourism is beginning to recover, with more visitors and yachts arriving, the agricultural sector is still struggling.

Farmers are still struggling to recover.

SECTION 2: SUMMARY OF HUMAN RIGHTS FINDINGS

1. Overview

The interview provides important evidence of the impact of the April 2021 La Soufrière volcanic eruption on agricultural production and rural livelihoods in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The Agriculture Officer described extensive damage to crops and livestock, difficulties accessing recovery assistance, continued environmental challenges and the slow recovery of farming communities.

The testimony highlights concerns relating to food security, livelihoods, economic recovery, access to assistance and government accountability.

2. Key findings

Finding 1: Extensive destruction of agricultural livelihoods

- More than 90% of agricultural activity in the affected area was reportedly impacted.
- Both crops and livestock suffered significant losses.
- Farmers lost productive assets and sources of income.

Human rights concern: The destruction of agricultural livelihoods threatens the right to work, the right to food and the right to an adequate standard of living.

Finding 2: Emergency assistance was provided to livestock

- The Ministry supplied commercial animal feed.
- Water was transported daily to animals in affected communities.
- The Agriculture Officer assisted with distributing feed and water.

Human rights observation: Emergency assistance helped address immediate animal welfare and agricultural needs. However, the longer-term consequences of livestock losses required additional recovery support.

Finding 3: Agricultural assessments were undertaken

- Agricultural assessments were conducted over approximately two weeks.
- Areas from Romans Hill to Malvern Woods and beyond Richmond were assessed.
- The assessments helped establish the financial value of agricultural damage.
- The information was used to support applications for international funding.

Human rights concern: While assessments were undertaken, identifying agricultural losses did not necessarily ensure that affected farmers received adequate and timely assistance.

Finding 4: Financial assistance was insufficient

- Some farmers received financial payments.
- Seeds and water tanks were also provided through donor agencies.
- The Agriculture Officer considered the assistance inadequate.
- Farmers continued to struggle financially and economically more than a year after the eruption.

Human rights concern: Insufficient recovery assistance can undermine the right to food, the right to work and the ability of affected households to maintain an adequate standard of living.

Finding 5: Volcanic ash continued to affect agricultural production

- Ash remained in agricultural land more than a year after the eruption.
- Some farmers had to remove ash before planting.
- Seedlings planted directly into ash-affected soil reportedly died.

- Farmers faced continued difficulties restoring production.

Human rights concern: The prolonged environmental effects demonstrate the need for sustained agricultural rehabilitation, soil restoration and technical assistance.

Finding 6: Agricultural resources remained undistributed

- Water tanks intended to support farmers reportedly remained in storage more than a year after the eruption.
- Farmers had repeatedly requested assistance.
- The Agriculture Officer could not explain why the tanks had not been distributed.

Human rights concern: This raises questions about transparency, accountability and the effective distribution of disaster recovery resources.

This issue requires further investigation with the relevant government authorities.

Finding 7: Structural barriers affected farmers

The Agriculture Officer identified several longstanding challenges:

- Difficulties obtaining farmer identification cards.
- Strict eligibility and documentation requirements.
- Limited financial incentives for registered farmers.
- High costs of seeds, fertiliser and machinery.
- Insufficient agricultural subsidies.
- Poor access roads to agricultural land.

Human rights concern: These structural barriers may disproportionately affect small-scale farmers and undermine their ability to maintain sustainable livelihoods and recover following a disaster.

Finding 8: Agricultural recovery lagged behind other sectors

The Agriculture Officer observed that tourism was beginning to recover, while agricultural communities continued to experience significant difficulties.

Human rights concern: This raises questions about whether agricultural recovery received sufficient priority within the wider national recovery programme, particularly given agriculture's importance to food security and rural employment.

SECTION 3: HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

The interview raises concerns relating to the following human rights:

Right or principle	Main concern identified
Right to food	Loss of crops, livestock and reduced local food production.
Right to work	Farmers unable to restore agricultural livelihoods.
Right to an adequate standard of living	Continued economic hardship and insufficient recovery assistance.
Equality and non-discrimination	Concerns about the relative allocation of assistance between sectors and communities.
Access to information	Limited information about undistributed water tanks and recovery resources.
Participation in public affairs	Insufficient evidence about whether farmers were consulted in recovery decisions.
Accountability	Questions about the management and distribution of recovery assistance.

Relevant international frameworks

The findings can be considered in relation to:

- **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:** Particularly Articles 6 and 11, concerning the right to work and the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food.
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:** Particularly Article 25, concerning participation in public affairs.
- **UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement:** Relevant to the protection and assistance of people displaced by the volcanic emergency.
- **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030:** Concerning disaster preparedness, resilience and recovery.

These frameworks provide relevant standards for evaluating disaster response and recovery. The interview alone does not establish a legal violation.

SECTION 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations arise from the concerns identified during the interview.

Area	Recommendation
Distribution of resources	Investigate why water tanks remained in storage and ensure outstanding resources reach farmers.
Financial assistance	Review the adequacy of financial support provided to affected farmers.
Soil restoration	Provide technical assistance, soil testing and support to rehabilitate ash-affected farmland.
Livestock recovery	Establish programmes to help farmers replace livestock lost during the eruption.
Agricultural subsidies	Increase support for seeds, fertiliser, machinery and other essential agricultural inputs.
Farmer registration	Review the requirements for obtaining farmer identification cards.
Rural infrastructure	Improve roads providing access to agricultural land.
Farmer consultation	Involve affected farmers in the planning and implementation of recovery programmes.
Transparency	Publish information about agricultural recovery funding and resource distribution.
Food security	Prioritise local agricultural production to strengthen national food security and reduce dependence on imported food.

SECTION 5: OVERALL HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVER CONCLUSION

The interview highlights the prolonged impact of the 2021 La Soufrière volcanic eruption on agricultural communities in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Although emergency assistance was provided during and following the eruption, the testimony suggests that agricultural recovery remained incomplete more than a year later.

The Agriculture Officer described continuing difficulties faced by farmers, including the loss of crops and livestock, persistent volcanic ash contamination, inadequate financial assistance and longstanding structural barriers within the agricultural sector.

Of particular concern was the reported existence of water tanks that remained undistributed in storage despite repeated requests for assistance from farmers. This raises questions about the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of government recovery programmes.

The interview also highlights the importance of recognising agriculture as an essential component of national food security, rural employment and economic resilience.

The central human rights concern is that affected farmers continued to experience economic hardship and livelihood insecurity long after the immediate volcanic emergency had passed.

The testimony indicates a need for sustained government support, equitable distribution of recovery resources and greater investment in agricultural rehabilitation.

Agricultural recovery should be treated as an essential part of disaster recovery, rather than a secondary priority.

SECTION 6: FURTHER INVESTIGATION REQUIRED

To strengthen the evidence gathered through this interview, further investigation should establish:

1. How many agricultural water tanks remained undistributed, and which government agency was responsible?
2. How many farmers received financial assistance, and what amounts were distributed?
3. What were the total estimated agricultural losses following the eruption?
4. How many farmers lost livestock, and what support was provided to replace animals?
5. Were farmers consulted about their recovery needs and the distribution of assistance?
6. What measures were introduced to address volcanic ash contamination?

7. How did agricultural recovery funding compare with support provided to other economic sectors?
8. What were the longer-term consequences for food availability, food prices and household food security?

Evidential limitations

This interview represents the testimony of one Agriculture Officer and should not be treated as representative of every farmer's experience.

The estimate that more than 90% of agriculture was affected, the reported existence of undistributed water tanks and the officer's assessment of inadequate assistance require corroboration through official records and additional interviews.

The interview provides valuable qualitative evidence but does not independently establish that a human rights violation occurred.

Final observer assessment: The testimony identifies significant concerns regarding the adequacy, accessibility and accountability of agricultural recovery assistance following the La Soufrière eruption. These concerns warrant further investigation and should inform wider human rights monitoring of the Government's disaster recovery response in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.