



HAITI TEN YEARS AFTER DOUZ JANVYE

Humanitarian perspectives and lessons
learnt from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti

Andrea Steinke

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Abstract

Haiti, January 12, 2010: a magnitude 7.0 earthquake takes the lives of at least 200 000 people, displaces more than two million survivors, and unveils the inequalities and colonial legacies deeply inscribed into the country's structure. Douz Janvyé, January 12 in Haitian Creole, also triggered the largest humanitarian response in recent history and mobilised an unprecedented amount of resources, funds, and aid workers – with varying degrees of experience and professionalism. Being host to the first post-war international development project, Haiti had been well familiar with the presence of international NGOs. Yet, after the earthquake, the number of aid organisations skyrocketed with estimations of up to 20 000 NGOs operating in the country. Even though national and international humanitarians saved many lives and contributed to the reconstruction of the country, the response was also met by a myriad of challenges reflecting the structural deficiencies of humanitarian action in general. This paper discusses the humanitarian experiences in the context of the earthquake response, raises crucial questions regarding systemic and organisational shortcomings, and presents the lessons learned from one of the most complex and challenging humanitarian interventions of the past decade.

Introduction

To the humanitarian community the earthquake in Haiti is of seminal importance – structurally as well as individually. Most of the professional aid workers roaming the floors of today's international NGO offices were involved in the response to the earthquake. To many of them, Haiti was a transformative experience. They remember vividly the tireless work, the overwhelming need, and their own frustrations with not being able to adequately respond to the issues at hand. Their experiences have raised crucial questions on systemic and organisational shortcomings and the lessons to be learnt from these inadequacies.

The earthquake of January 12, 2010, known as Douz Janvyé in Haiti, not only unveiled the wounds the country had suffered in the years and centuries before January 2010, they also laid bare the “Emperor's new clothes” of previous aid interventions in the country. Despite the fact that Haiti can be labelled the “patient zero” of development, with the first ever post-war development project implemented in 1948 in the country's Marbial valley, sixty years and thousands of projects later, the circumstances appeared to have all but bettered. The earthquake hit a country with extremely weak structures and triggered one of the largest international humanitarian responses to date.

Figure A:
Infographic Haiti
Source: Centre for Humanitarian Action

A

HAITI



11.3 million



French and Haitian Creole



Port-au-Prince



GDP per capita 1,272.5 US\$

Source: World Bank (2019)



Source: Wikimedia

6.3 million people affected by complex emergency in 2020

Source: USAID (2020)

53.100 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in 2019

Source: IDMC (2019)

4 million

people food
insecure

170 out of 189

Human
Development
Index

4.6 million

people in need
of humanitarian
assistance

Source: OCHA (2020), UNDP (2020), OCHA (2020)

The Haitian disaster was a 500 years earthquake.

In the history of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), no other operation in a single country has measured the size of that in post-earthquake Haiti (Biquet 2013, Lundahl 2013). For good reasons:

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake marked one of the most devastating disasters in world history (Morsut 2012). The energy equivalent of 35 Hiroshima bombs was set free (Dorsinville 2011), claiming immense destruction and loss of life, with estimations ranging between 217.000 (UN OCHA) and 316.000 (Haitian government) deaths. Major parts of the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince and other cities such as Léogâne and Jacmel were destroyed. 2.3 million people lost their homes and were internally displaced. There was an estimated 7.8 billion USD damage to the country's infrastructure, an infrastructure already insufficient prior to the disaster.

The 2010 earthquake was a catastrophe that would have brought a nation with a functioning infrastructure to its knees. According to the United Nations (UN), ten million cubic meters of rubble had to be removed in the months and years after January 12.¹ This alone was a mammoth task. It would have been for any nation. For comparison: in the aftermath of 9/11 it took the city of New York nine months to clear Ground Zero, with roughly one tenth of the amount of rubble of post-earthquake Port-au-Prince.

Along with thousands of schools and several hospitals, thirteen out of sixteen government buildings were levelled, claiming the lives of thousands of nurses, doctors, teachers and civil servants. Many insignia of power fell: the presidential palace, the cathedral, the UN headquarters. 102 UN staff lost their lives when the building housing the UN mission collapsed; the UN suffered the biggest single loss in the organisation's history. Among the fatalities were the UN's number one in the country, the Special Representative of the Secretary General, as well as his deputy. No one was prepared for a cataclysm of that dimension. The earthquake posed major challenges not only to all parts of Haitian society, but also to the international community. The Haitian police and the Haitian Department for Civil Protection were as overwhelmed by the disaster as international NGOs and the UN mission. By all intents and purposes, the Haiti earthquake was a complex emergency par excellence.

Earthquakes "follow the fault lines of inequalities" (Beckett 2019). The fatal effects of the seismic activities on January 12, 2010 are the legacy of colonial exploitation, deforestation, mismanagement, dictatorship, military occupation, kleptocracy and neoliberalisation. Seen from that angle, the Haitian disaster was a "catastrophe annoncée" (Rainhorn 2012), or a "500 years earthquake" (Oliver-Smith 2010). Earthquakes are primarily urban disasters. Douz Janvy affected the capital of a highly centralised country. Haiti underwent a harsh rural exodus in the past four decades. Deforestation, soil erosion and neoliberal adjustment policies drew people to the bidonvilles of Port-au-Prince to work in the sweatshops of the international garment industry or to try other ways to *cheche lavi*, to make a living.

The city grew immensely, and the Haitian government lacked the capacities, ability, and will to provide adequate housing or enforce building codes for the city dwellers. Prior to the earthquake, 2.5 million people lived in the capital, one fourth of the country's population. Humanitarian assistance to urban zones comes with different challenges than in rural or peri-urban areas. The sheer concentration of people and bodies poses a variety of obstacles to sanitation and hygiene, distributive practices, and security.

NGOs post-earthquake practices mirrored the centralised structure of the state. Mostly due to their own focus and structures in the capital, they were unable to provide incentives for people to stay outside of Port-au-Prince. Of the 630,000 people who fled to the provinces, the majority returned to live in internally displaced people (IDP) camps during the next six months, as a result of relief services providing food, hygiene and cash for work being mostly unavailable outside the capital (Bengtsson et al. 2011).

In the days and weeks after January 12, an unprecedented amount of resources, funds, aid workers, peacekeepers and soldiers were mobilised. Even before the earthquake, Haiti was dubbed the "Republic of NGOs". After January 2010, an estimated 20,000 NGOs were operating in the country, ranking Haiti at the top of the list of the highest ratio of NGOs per capita worldwide. Post-earthquake, the country was literally overflowing with international aid organisations. The earthquake triggered a "massive influx of international NGOs with varying capacity, levels of professionalism and resources" (Grünewald et al. 2010).

Humanitarian Response Teams flew in to take over the operations of more development-oriented offices. They did so firstly because many aid workers were affected themselves – physically and psychologically, and secondly, because the post-earthquake situation necessitated swift decisions, quick solutions and clear minds unaffected by personal trauma. These transitions did not always go well and laid open the clash of cultures between humanitarianism and development; this was especially the case in multi-mandated organisations. The Haiti response made painfully clear that the concept of Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) is more than just a buzzword for funding applications, but rather a crucial appeal for organisations to work on better synergies, integration, and coordination of both spheres, in order to effectively prepare for the next disaster to come. And come it will. Disasters induced by climate change are among the biggest humanitarian challenges of the future. Haiti ranks number three of the countries most affected by extreme weather events in the last two decades.²

The Haiti response made clear that Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) is more than just a buzzword.

The structure of IDP camps disintegrated traditional family structures.

Challenges

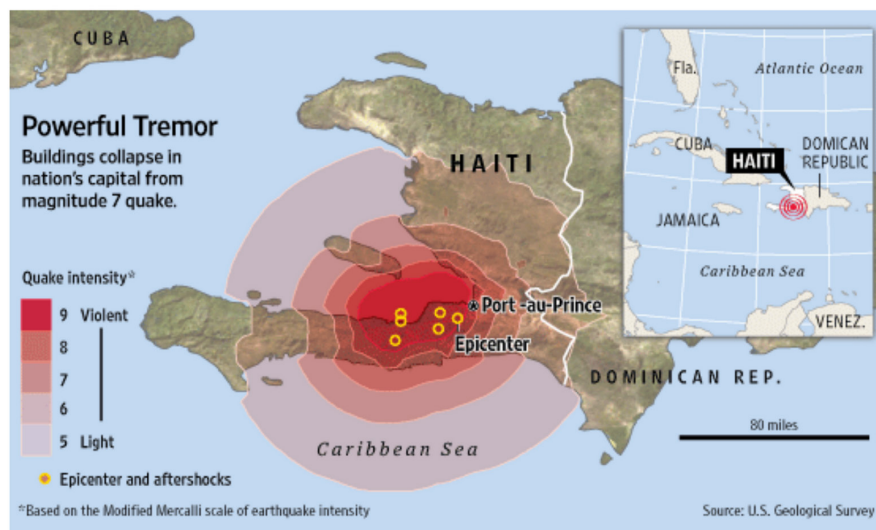
The relief efforts themselves were part and parcel of the post-earthquake problems the country faced. Despite lacking operating structures on the ground, international organisations rushed into Haiti. One reason was the media attention: the media coverage of the earthquake had reached previously unparalleled heights. The world literally watched Haiti fall into pieces, live on screen and on social media. The visibility of the disaster alone created an immense amount of pressure for organisations to join the relief efforts. Not going to Haiti – even for good reasons like not being prepared or trained – was perceived as unjustifiable to the general public. NGOs were driven by the pressure of large sums of money pledged and dispersed by private as well as institutional donors. Organisations were urged to “follow the money”. Some hired and deployed management staff fresh from universities, with little to no practical experience regarding Haiti and humanitarian action: “With the masses of people, you thought: Did they come to get help or are they coming here to help? Because among them were people, with a big heart and so on, but not a clue of the matter. They actually hindered the relief because they did not know what to do”, a humanitarian recounted the NGO cluster meetings after the earthquake.

In Haiti, like in many other contexts, humanitarian intervention created contradictory dynamics by enforcing the very inequalities humanitarian action seeks to diminish. The international presence led to a form of humanitarian gentrification; the market value of the precious little living space left increased, displacing Haitians from the centres of the worst affected cities. Those amongst the most vulnerable had to resettle in IDP camps. In these camps, numerous problems were manifest: unhygienic conditions, lack of basic services, lack of privacy, and sexualised violence – directed especially but not exclusively against women. 22 percent of IDP residents were victims of violence in the camps in 2011 (Muggah 2011).

Furthermore, in IDP camps structural downfalls, a lack of logistical oversight and established distributive practices exposed the most vulnerable members of society to abuse. For instance, many women were forced into sexual interactions in order to receive ration cards from gatekeepers installed by NGOs. The structure of IDP camps also disintegrated traditional family structures, which are of profound importance, as the bedrock of solidarity and support in Haiti. Often, food was giving to family units regardless of their size. As a result, many families split up in order to receive a sufficient amount of food, encouraged by the reward structure introduced by the NGOs (Schuller 2016).

Such problematic dynamics were not only present during the rehabilitation phase but affected reconstruction alike. When it came to housing reconstruction, houses could only be rebuilt if land tenure issues were clear; this meant only those who were landowners before the earthquake could benefit from reconstruction programs.

HAITI EARTHQUAKE 2010



Source: U.S. Geological Survey

Magnitude of the earthquake on 12 January 2010: 7.0

Official death toll by Haitian government: 316,000

IDPs due to the earthquake: 2.3 million

Total earthquake impact cost: around 7.8 billion US\$

Source: CEPR 2020, CEPR 2020, OCHA 2020, European Commission 2011

Less than one percent of humanitarian funds went to the Government of Haiti.

Those who had nothing prior to Douz Janvyè, those who lived in rented houses and were displaced by their landlords, ended up with empty hands. Reconstruction in this regard often meant to re-establish the pre-earthquake status quo, marked by severe disparities.

The exponential growth of international organisations presence in the country increased the “brain-drain” of the Haitian work force from public institutions to more affluent international organisations, thereby contributing to the lack of government capacities. While it is not the primary goal nor intent of humanitarian action to enforce and stabilise government structures – nor should it be considering the core humanitarian principles – following a Do No Harm approach to intervention, and not weakening state structure, should be top humanitarian priority. While the “Republic of NGOs” basically ruled over the country’s fate, iNGOs deplored over the absence of the Haitian state. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck criticised what he called the amnesia of these institutions. The structures that international organisations faced in Haiti in 2010 were those that their prior and contemporary presence had helped co-create.

Among the most persistent narratives of the failures of the post-earthquake intervention was the lack of Haitian ownership over the funds, and the visions of what “building back better” was supposed to mean. Within the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction, Haitians were denied ownership over their own tragedy (Doucet et al. 2012). Cluster meetings with major NGOs took place in the UN log base, guarded by UN soldiers. People without IDs or authorisation, often representatives of Haitian organisations, were denied access, while those belonging to the international aid system – most of them white – could pass, sometimes even without having their passports checked, a circumstance that further deepened the wound of racist inequalities enforced by the earthquake (Miles 2012). In the beginning, meetings were held in English to cater to the language inabilities of international aid workers. Eventually meetings were switched to French. Haitian Creole translations were not provided in most contexts.

These systemic structures of exclusion become more evident when looking at the distribution of funds: of the 6.43 billion USD from bilateral and multilateral agencies distributed between 2010 and 2012, 90.3% went to non-Haitian entities, organisations and NGOs. 0.9% of the humanitarian funds dispersed between 2010 and 2012 went to the Government of Haiti³ – less than one percent in total.

Numerous cases highlight how the government of Haiti was passed over by the international structure. Starting with the international press, that had to be literally dragged to listen to the Haitian government’s press conferences on the event, and ending with the side-lining of high-ranking government officials like Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive next to former US

president Bill Clinton, as co-chair of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC). The IHRC was founded in April 2010, and granted executive power to coordinate the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, and the allocation and redistribution of funds, for 18 months. The commission operated under State of Emergency Laws, placing Haiti under a de facto trusteeship (Fatton 2011). While Haitians were formally part the IHRC, they expressed concern about their position. A statement read: "in reality, Haitian members of the board have only one role: to endorse the decisions made by the Director and the Executive Committee" (Willems 2010).

When examining the relationship between the weak state and the international system bypassing the state, arguably to avoid corruption, presents a classical catch-22 situation. Some regard this as a pretextual argument to downplay other motivations for channelling money to international NGOs and private contractors as "for decades only a very limited amount of foreign assistance has in fact ended up in governmental hands" (Fatton 2011). That is not to say that the Haitian government is not suffering from corruption. However, what is striking in the matter are the double standards applied when differentiating state from international structures.

While humanitarian and development NGOs might operate on what can be considered a moral mandate, based on the notion of a common humanity, neither their statute nor their practices are democratically legitimised in any shape or form. Nor can they, in their sum, be considered transparent, effective, or accountable per se. This applies to private corporations to an even lesser degree.

Looking at the distribution of funds in post-earthquake Haiti begs the question whether approving large sums of money to certain organisations was necessarily a better choice than providing funds to the Haitian government. The first project to be approved by the IHRC handed large sums of money to the US-American manufacturing company Clayton Homes, despite the fact that the corporation was undergoing a US government lawsuit at the time. In 2005, the company provided formaldehyde-infested trailers to people made homeless by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Yet in 2010, similar trailers were provided as interim schools to Haiti; when tests were undertaken heavily increased levels of carcinogenic formaldehyde were found. In response, the mayor of Léogâne remarked, "We'll take this as a black thing", thereby drawing a connection between the in the majority black populations of New Orleans and Haiti (Doucet et al. 2012).

Most of the funds of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) similarly went to private contractors. The US for-profit development company Chemonics International alone received nearly 200 Million USD, despite their past projects in Afghanistan having been evaluated as ineffective (Cunningham 2012).

"NGOs are making money off of us".

800 000 were affected by Cholera, more than 10 000 died.

The extent of loss, suffering and destruction left behind a whole country traumatised and impacted people for a lifetime.

Only 0.7% of USAID funds went to Haitian entities. Over half of the remaining 99.3% went to firms located in the Washington DC Beltway area (Johnston and Main 2013). In February 2010, three weeks after the earthquake, the US ambassador to Haiti, Kenneth Merten, sent a cable titled “the gold rush is on” back to Washington. These facts do not remain unknown to Haitians and form the basis of their grievances. “NGOs are making money off of us” (Schuller 2016) is a comment often heard on the streets of post-earthquake Port-au-Prince.

Harm done & Trust lost

The earthquake did not stop on the 12th of January 2010. While more than 50 tectonic aftershocks were recorded, “humanitarian aftershocks” continued to shake the country (Schuller 2016). Nine months after the earthquake, cholera, a disease with its “own preferential option for the poor” (Farmer 2011), began to rapidly spread across Haiti. Roughly 800 000 people were affected by the epidemic; in the case of over 10 000 the disease was fatal. The origins of the waterborne pathogen could be traced to a Nepalese UN battalion near Mirebalais, in the centre of Haiti. Incorrect wastewater management led to the contamination of one of the country’s lifelines, the Artibonite River, with infected faeces. In less than three weeks the bacteria had reached Port-au-Prince (Walton et al. 2011). Hurricane Thomas provided ideal conditions for the disease to spread into the IDP camps. Despite the fact that epidemiological research found that vibrio cholerae bacteria in Haiti was “a perfect match” to a strain found in Nepal (Piarroux et al. 2011), it took six years for Secretary General of the UN Ban Ki Moon to acknowledge – upon leaving office – that the UN “simply did not do enough with regard to the cholera outbreak and its spread in Haiti.” While Ban Ki Moon publicly apologised to the Haitian people, the UN never took official responsibility for introducing the disease to the country in the first place,⁴ allegedly to impede indemnity claims from the victims and their families. The few cases brought to court only confirmed the UN’s ability to withstand the claims. As a result, large parts of the Haitian population disapproved of the presence of UN peacekeepers in the country. For all intents and purpose, serious harm was done.

Unfortunately, the cholera epidemic was not the only incident that negatively impacted the relationship between international organisations and the Haitian people. Recently, reports of so-called “MINUSTAH babies” have started to surface, children born as the result of interactions between UN staff and Haitians, ranging from romantic relationships, to sexual exploitation and abuse, to rape, and even statutory rape. Also, expatriate staff of the British organisation Oxfam was involved in numerous cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in Haiti during the post-earthquake period.⁵ While the revelations rocked the international aid community in 2018, it came to no surprise to anyone who had spent time in post-earthquake Haiti. The Oxfam scandal made

manifest that this problem is not at all unique to the United Nations, nor even to singular NGOs, but is deeply inscribed into patriarchal and unequal hierarchies of power between Haitians and international organisations. Despite all evidence, there is not a single known case of an expatriate being trialled in front of a Haitian court, for breaking Haitian law prohibiting engaging in sex work or for engaging in any sexual activity involving minors.

These cases of violence and abuse, mixed with reports about the misappropriation and mismanagement of funds – the most renowned being the case of the US-American Red Cross⁶ – the level of impunity and lack of accountability towards the Haitian population, all contributed to a profound absence of trust in, and acceptance of, international organisations in Haiti.

Haitians were not the only ones disillusioned by the post-earthquake intervention; many foreign humanitarians, who were on the ground, criticised the conditions, their lack of ability to adequately cope, and help others. The people who flew into Haiti days after the earthquake, who worked relentlessly, trying to dig out the few survivors from under the rubbles of the fallen city; those trying to distribute the little resources they had left; the ones operating the limbs of people hit by concrete on heavy rotation, everyone was overwhelmed: “I wasn't prepared...I have never seen the likes of it”, MSF doctor Javid Abdelmoneim stated.⁷ NGO staff, national and international, who knew the country well were also among the victims, both physically and psychologically. The extent of loss, suffering and destruction left behind a whole country traumatised and impacted people for a lifetime, especially the experience of the incapacity to adequately respond to a disaster of that dimension: “It left a scar. It was the first time I was exposed to so much avoidable death. It was the first time I felt quite so helpless, not being able to do what I knew I could do for my patients. That was hard to deal with. People should not be dying this way”,⁸ the British MSF doctor remembered.

Lessons learnt?

After 2010 the international community almost unanimously agreed that the Haiti intervention was marked by a variety of flaws and mistakes that could have been prevented. Many NGOs and international organisations had their post-earthquake operations evaluated internally – and were critical of their shortcomings. Some made their reflections public, spreading hope for better interventions in the future.

One very tangible lesson that the international community took from Haiti is the need to strengthen staff and knowledge capacities on the specific challenges of confronting disaster in urban contexts (Sandersen et al. 2012). Transitional shelters for example have been identified as a double-edged sword.

Hurricane Matthew: international actors were hesitant to become involved, marked by the 2010 experience of failed and ineffective interventions.

Tens of thousands of so-called T-shelters continued to be set up long into the year 2011. Many on the ground criticised this prolonged practice as a cheap win for international NGOs: importing and setting up transitional structures and publishing pictures of these on websites and in reports was a lot easier than investing in more sustainable and longer-term solutions. These longer-term solutions, for instance, would have required dealing with challenging land tenure issues. One of the lessons learnt after Haiti was using T-shelter only when part of an overall long-term housing strategy.

According to Biquet, the 2010 cholera intervention showed that the shortcomings identified in the beginning of 2010, namely emergency preparedness and coordination, had not been put into better practice by the end of the year (Biquet 2013). More specifically, the challenges of coordination and the difficulties surrounding the relatively new cluster system have been connected to an identified lack of senior humanitarian leadership (Sandersen et al. 2012). To illustrate, after the earthquake it took the UN three weeks to set up the humanitarian country team.⁹

The next major disaster after the earthquake and the cholera epidemic was Hurricane Matthew hitting the southern peninsula of Haiti in October 2016. The hurricane killed more than 500 people, affected more than two million and brought about damage amounting to 2.8 billion USD.¹⁰ This disaster could have been an opportunity to prove what had been learnt from previous failures. A recent report however labelled the response as “underwhelming to say the least” (Hsu et al. 2019). Whereas in 2010 the capital of the centralised country was in the midst of attention, in 2016 inaccessibility was the biggest hindrance to the relief efforts. With many streets being submerged in and partially destroyed by water, the overland delivery of relief goods was nearly impossible in some parts of the peninsula. Additionally, international actors were hesitant to become involved, marked by the 2010 experience of failed and ineffective interventions. Donor fatigue with regard to Haiti was rampant. Haitian authorities on the other hand, in some cases reportedly refused to distribute tents to not fall into the IDP-camp trap once again. While NGOs tried to not repeat the same mistakes, the results of these attempts varied. Hsu and Schuller (2019) pointed out the recurrent lack of inclusion of Haitian communities and organisations in the post-Matthew decision-making process.

Furthermore, the relief action took place in the midst of national elections, unearthing one of the dilemmas of localisation in humanitarian action: how to find counterparts on the local level without playing into the hands of politicians who use it for their own gain. Due to a lack of meaningful partnerships with Haitian organisations, international actors simply lacked knowledge of local power structures. In late 2016, due to this shortcoming, NGOs inadvertently helped increase the popularity of soon-to-be President Jovenel Moïse (Hsu et al. 2019).

Figure C:
Work to rescue a woman from a cathedral in the center
of Port-au-Prince 6 days after the earthquake
Source: Katie Orlinsky / Caritas international

C



Haiti is currently experiencing one of the worst political crises in decades.

In terms of Haitian measures undertaken, unfortunately the Haitian parliament has not approved of a new earthquake resistant building code to this date. However, due to the impotence and mismanagement experienced post 2010 earthquake, the Government of Haiti has attempted to install and enforce control and coordination efforts, so that the emergency response to disasters remains in their own hands. In 2018 another earthquake hit Haiti, this time in the north of the country. Though considered moderate compared to the events of January 12th 2010, it affected the lives of thousands: 18 people lost their lives and thousands their homes. However, after this tragedy, Haitian authorities took matters in hand. The Haitian government led the emergency response via its National and Departmental Emergency Operation Centres (COUN/COUD). NGOs on their way to deliver aid but unregistered with the Haitian Directorate of Civil Protection (DPC) were turned away from the affected areas by the Haitian police. The civil protection's successful efforts to control and coordinate relief actions also helped international NGOs improve their response.¹¹

Moreover, after the Oxfam scandal became public in 2018, the Haitian government temporarily withdrew the organisations license to work in the country. There has also been recent progress with regard to the accountability of troop contributing countries: the Chilean senate just voted to open an investigation into the sexual exploitation and abuse allegedly committed by Chilean UN soldiers in Haiti.¹²

Haiti 2020 – plus ça change

After the earthquake the World Bank tried to promote the disaster as a “catalyst for huge, positive change”.¹³ In a similar vein, UN agencies were very concerned to “build back better”. While some interventions have contributed to positive change in the lives of individuals, the overall response has not brought about huge, or indeed wholly positive change as envisioned by internationals and hoped for by Haitians. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), more than 30.000 people continue to live in camps that were created after January 12, 2010.

The humanitarian situation in Haiti in 2020 is projected to be dire: While the Cholera crisis is now seemingly under control ten years after the outbreak, an estimated 4.2 million people will be affected by food insecurity. Of those, 1.2 million will experience emergency levels of food insecurity, an estimated ten percent of the Haitian population. In 2019 the numbers of malnourishment were exceptionally high. The price of staple food has risen by a third during the last year alone.¹⁴ The inflation rate in the country is currently at 20 percent. The Haitian Gourde has lost an immense amount of its value, with dramatic effects: “Generally speaking there is food available, it’s just that people don’t have the cash to buy anything”, commented the country director of Mercy Corps while opting for cash transfer rather than food relief.¹⁵

In total 4.6 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2020, 2 million more than envisioned in the preceding year, 2019. Humanitarian organisations are alarmed about the current situation, but short of funding. Attracting funding for humanitarian emergencies in a complex and protracted crisis is harder than after a much-publicised earthquake. In addition, Haiti is far from being a “donor darling”. Donor fatigue began already a year after 2010. The 2019 UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Haiti had the lowest overall funding rate worldwide.¹⁶

While the humanitarian needs are overwhelming ten years after the earthquake, Haiti is currently experiencing one of the worst political crises in decades. What started as a protest against an announced raise in fuel prices in 2018, had grown into a full-fledged crisis by 2019. Protesters denounced the misuse of Petro Caribe funds, granted by Venezuela, to sell oil for a reduced price and low interest rates to the Haitian government, in order to fund development in the country. According to a report of Haiti’s Superior Court of Auditors and Administrative Disputes more than 2 billion USD of that money has gone missing, allegedly due to misuse involving several former and current members of the Government, including the sitting president.¹⁷ This fact brought hundreds of thousands of people to protest in the streets in 2019. A broad civil society coalition of women’s organisations, peasant organisations, students and churches demanded the Haitian president Jovenel Moïse step down and the perpetrators of the corruption be held legally accountable. Some of the grievances manifested in violent confrontation between protesters and the authorities. Since October 2018 the capital Port-au-Prince has been coming to a halt regularly, a gridlock that affects all parts of Haitian society. Commentators are comparing the current situation to that of 2004, the year of the second ousting of Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the beginning of a 13 yearlong UN stabilisation mission. January the 13th marked the end of the term of the Haitian Parliament meaning Jovenel Moïse now rules by decree.

In this situation, humanitarian aid should not and cannot be the sole international response to the current crisis in Haiti. Generally, humanitarian aid does not provide solutions to the world’s problems, but is rather attempting to correct the direst political mistakes by helping people stay alive under the most adverse circumstances. There is no humanitarian solution for the crisis in and of Haiti: “Haitians don’t call for help. They fight, they talk about equality and freedom, about a world to change. The emergency in Haiti is less about international aid than about ending the status quo. It condemns the country’s dependency on aid. The humanitarian community is involved in reproducing a system that Haitians want to break with”,¹⁸ political scientist Frédéric Thomas states.

Let go of the myth
that any help is
better than no
help.

Meanwhile, as was shown, there are real humanitarian needs to be solved in Haiti. Amidst all political crisis and demands, humanitarian organisations should continue to support people in distress. Not without considering the lessons learnt from the earthquake:

1. Build, cultivate and strengthen partnerships to organisations in the country; Haitians are the most important stakeholders of their future. They are the experts of their needs. Listen.
2. Let go of the myth that any help is better than no help at all. It is not. If you are not ready or qualified for a certain type of intervention, leave it to other experts and stick to what you know best.
3. Do not follow the money by any means. Educate the donors; make them aware of the peculiarities and complexity of the Haitian context.
4. Coordinate and unionise with other international and national organisations, to amplify demands vis-à-vis donor governments and institutions.
5. Be accountable to donors, governments, and first and foremost, to the people your organisation's mission is to serve. Humanitarian output is not equivalent to outcome.
6. Create and share knowledge based on your expertise and experiences and make sure knowledge is not lost. Implement sound structures of institutional learning, especially with regard to emergency preparedness.
7. Take care of your staff, provide psychological support and install mechanisms to help your team deal with frustration and trauma. Hurt people hurt people.
8. Speak up about sexual abuse and other forms of abuse of power in your own and in other organisations; install organisational mechanisms to detect and investigate claims, bring the perpetrators to justice and support the victims of abuse.
9. Always consider protection. Exposing vulnerable groups to (more) violence as a consequence of implemented programs is not an acceptable lesser of two evils.
10. Above all: Do No Harm.

Endnotes

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This paper reflects the views of the author.

Dr Andrea Steinke is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) where she leads the research project “The Triple Nexus in Practice”. She has worked extensively on issues related to humanitarianism and peace-keeping.

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