

From Relief to Recovery

Supporting good governance in post-earthquake Haiti

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A Haitian man looks at the destroyed homes of one neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, May 6, 2010. © Ami Vitale

The humanitarian response undertaken in Haiti after the earthquake that struck on 12 January 2010 has been one of the most complex ever. However, as the first anniversary of the quake approaches, the Haitian state, together with the international community, is making little progress in reconstruction.

The Haitian authorities need to show greater strategic leadership and take decisions that reflect the priority needs of the Haitian population. They need to initiate public infrastructure projects that put people to work and build skills; support people to return home or allocate land for new houses; and invest in agriculture. The international community should do much more to support these efforts by increasing the capacity and accountability of Haitian institutions.

Summary

The earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010 had a devastating impact on the already vulnerable island nation, leaving more than 200,000 people dead and over one million homeless. In October 2010, Haiti was struck by a second disaster: as of mid December 2010, a cholera outbreak has affected more than 122,000 people, leaving at least 2,600 dead.¹

The humanitarian response that has taken place over the past 12 months has saved countless lives by providing water, sanitation, shelter, food aid, and other vital assistance to millions of people. Yet, as Haiti approaches the first anniversary of the earthquake, neither the Haitian state nor the international community is making significant progress in reconstruction.

This is deeply disappointing for the many Haitians who hoped that the country would make a fresh start and that their lives would improve, but it is not so surprising. Well before the earthquake, Haiti suffered from extreme poverty, gross inequality, chronic political instability, and weak, corrupt state institutions. Even in developed countries, disaster recovery can take a considerable length of time. In Japan, for example, it took more than seven years for the city of Kobe to recover from the 1995 earthquake.

However, even a steep hill can be climbed. To deal with the challenges created by the earthquake, the new Haitian government should urgently work together with the international community to create the conditions needed to allow people to leave the displacement camps and rebuild their livelihoods.

Listening to the Haitian people

The Haitian authorities need to move forward on critical issues that are their prime, and sole, responsibility. They should settle legal issues that are hampering the repair of houses and the removal of rubble. They must also take steps to support people to return to their communities and to construct homes in existing or other appropriate locations.

The government of Haiti should, as a matter of priority, develop a long-term plan and implement investment programmes that put people to work and build skills. This could focus on labour-intensive public infrastructure projects, such as water provision and road building. It should also introduce social protection programmes, such as cash transfer and micro-credit programmes, which both safeguard short-term welfare and generate economic activity. Donors should support and prioritise these endeavours.

In Haiti, power and decision making, as well as wealth, are concentrated in the capital Port-au-Prince, mostly in the hands of a very few. The process of political and economic decentralisation of the country needs to go further and faster, liberating local authorities to

tackle local issues. In the aftermath of the disputed November 2010 elections, this should be combined with a drive to reduce corruption at all levels, build trust between Haitian citizens and the authorities, and to make government more responsive and accountable to communities. Donors, UN agencies, and NGOs should work with local government and should support this process.

Some parts of the Haitian government have been working more efficiently. The national water and sanitation authority, DINEPA (Direction Nationale d'Eau Potable et d'Assainissement), along with departments within the ministries of health and agriculture and many local mayors, have shown that there are government institutions that are capable of taking a leading role in the recovery.

The voices of poor Haitians are seldom heard in the policy-making process that directly affects their lives. The Haitian authorities, along with the international community, should consult, communicate, and involve the Haitian people in national reconstruction plans and programmes. Women must be part of this process. Women's participation in decision making at all levels is fundamental for the transformation of power, citizenship and democracy. The Haitian authorities need to do more to support the efforts of millions of ordinary Haitian men and women who are struggling daily to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Undermining the Haitian state

The international community has not done enough to support good governance and effective leadership in Haiti. Many aid agencies continue to bypass local and national authorities in the delivery of assistance, while donors are not coordinating their actions or adequately consulting the Haitian people and key government ministries when taking decisions that will affect Haiti's future.

The Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) was established in April 2010 by the government of Haiti under pressure from the international community. It has rightly been tasked with improving co-ordination, building state capacity, and bringing donors and the government together to lead the reconstruction process effectively.

However, the IHRC, under considerable US influence,² has so far failed to fulfil this function. The IHRC should do much more to involve Haitian ministries, local government, and the Haitian people in the planning process and project implementation.³ At present, there are only two, non-voting, representatives of Haitian civil society organisations able to attend meetings of the Commission.⁴

Donors need to stop the 'rampant bilateralism'⁵ and the often contradictory policies and priorities that plague the IHRC. They should also co-ordinate much more closely among themselves in order to avoid gaps and duplication in funding. For example, money has been made available for temporary housing, but almost no funds have been allocated for rubble removal.

Donor governments also need to uphold their commitments and deliver on pledges to rebuild Haiti. In November 2010, the Office of the UN Special Envoy to Haiti reported that only a little over 40 per cent of funds pledged for 2010 had been disbursed.⁶

Whatever the weaknesses of the Haitian government, it remains the sovereign authority whose engagement is essential if relief, reconstruction, and development in Haiti are to be successful. After November's fractious general election, the new government will face a massive task. But it will also have an historic opportunity to make a break with the past and build a better Haiti. To do so, national and international actors will need to redouble their efforts to strengthen the state's capacity, policies, and accountability at local and national levels. Neither a 'republic of NGOs'⁷ nor a 'shadow' trustee government composed of donors and international financial institutions will provide sustainable solutions for the Haitian people.

Recommendations

The new Haitian government should:

- Show real political leadership and urgency in reconstructing the country, including by developing a public works programme that creates jobs and builds skills; supporting homeless families to return or resettle in appropriate locations; implementing social protection programmes such as cash transfer and micro-credit programmes; and investing in agriculture and Haitian businesses;
- Put measures in place to reduce corruption and improve accountability, and speed up the decentralisation of power to local authorities.

International donor governments, the UN, and international NGOs should:

- Work far more closely and effectively with the Haitian authorities, reinforcing their capacity and working to improve the performance of ministries;
- Donors should release funds promised at the New York conference in March 2010 and improve transparency related to pledges and disbursements. They should co-operate much more closely with each other and should harmonise policies and priorities;
- Major stakeholders, including Bill Clinton, should urgently review the workings of the IHRC and speed up delivery of its mandate.

The Haitian authorities, donor governments, the UN, and international NGOs should:

- Consult, communicate and effectively involve Haitian citizens in the reconstruction of their country and ensure recovery programmes reflect their priority needs.

Notes

- 1 UN OCHA Haiti Cholera Situation Report 23 December 2010:
<http://ochaonline.un.org/tabid/6412/language/en-US/Default.aspx>
- 2 During interviews with UN and foreign embassy staff in Haiti in November and December 2010, representatives highlighted to Oxfam the leading role that the USA played in creation of the IHRC and the continued importance of the USA in influencing how the IHRC functions.
- 3 Interviews with representatives from Haitian civil society, government officials and donors, November 2010..
- 4 These represent the Haitian Diaspora and Haitian NGOs. In addition, there is one representative from the labour unions and one from the business community who are able to vote.
- 5 Interview with senior UN official in relation to the lack of coordination between donors, 20 November 2010.
- 6 UN Office of the Special Envoy to Haiti, November 2010. <http://www.haitispecialenvoy.org/>
- 7 The large number of NGOs providing services in Haiti in the place of the Haitian state has led some commentators to call the country 'a republic of NGOs'.

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