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The State of Haiti

By David Lallemand

The scale of the disaster in Haiti is hard to describe or even conceptualize. The numbers—up to 300,000 fatalities, 1.3 million living in tents, 600,000 displaced, 100,000 buildings destroyed—are bewildering in their enormity. They are also shocking in their uncertainty—Haiti is a country in which death and displacement are counted to the nearest 100,000.

Driving from the airport, my first glimpse of the destruction that spawned such horrifying guesswork was building after building collapsed, a nightmarish vision drilled home by series of floor slabs stacked on top of each other. On one drive past a pile of rubble, only a spiral staircase indicates that it was once a building, let alone Haiti's biggest super-market.

As we moved about the city, young men and women filtered through the piles of rubble, breaking apart large concrete pieces to pull out steel bars, which they planned to use for reconstruction. This is a dangerous practice, as these bars are severely deformed and corroded. But for many, these savings on steel are the only way they can afford to rebuild anything at all.

Wrapping my head around the scale of the disaster took a long time. As a PhD student in structural engineering and focusing on earthquakes, I



Downtown Port-au-Prince 5 months after the earthquake (photo by Anna Konotchick)

was in Haiti specifically for the purpose of documenting the scale of the physical damage to the affected area. I traveled to Leogane, a town to the west of Port-au-Prince. Due to combinations of proximity to the epicenter, soil conditions and directivity effects (much like the Doppler effect), this city underwent an amplified version of ground shaking. Eighty percent of the buildings collapsed.

Displacement

As distressing as the physical damage to buildings and infrastructure, the number of internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps is incredible. With 1.3 million homeless in the Port-au-Prince region, every square meter of open space in the city is occupied by tents and makeshift shelters.

Numerous articles have claimed that for many Haitians, life in the camps is better than it was before the earthquake. This claim is used by outside observers to remind people of the dire living conditions of Haitians even before the earthquake. It is used to explain the fact that many people live in the camps even as their homes were undamaged. But this simple caricature misses the complexities of the situation.

After visiting and evaluating hundreds of buildings, collapsed and intact, it is clear that many Haitians are traumatized to be indoors. With the collapse of buildings killing 15% of Port-au-Prince's population, this is understandable. Others may still have a home but have lost their



Aerial picture of a camp (Photo from "Haiti Demain")

livelihood, and living in camps may be the only way to receive aid. In those neighborhoods that suffered the most damage, people who still have homes have lost their community. As strong social networks are often as critical as shelter in times of danger, many have chosen to join the survivors of their communities in camps.

Reconstruction

The incredible scale of destruction and displacement is daunting as the Government of Haiti, with the help of international donors and organizations, draws up plans for reconstruction and development. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment presented at the March 31 New York Donor's conference aims at turning Haiti into an "emerging country" by 2030. The main lines for this action plan are:

1. Territorial rebuilding
2. Economic rebuilding
3. Social rebuilding
4. Institutional rebuilding

This last point is perhaps the most critical, since the success of the other three most likely depend on the strength and dedication of the Haitian state. Hence it is critical that while acknowledging the current weakness of the Government of Haiti, it must still be at the helm of all major reconstruction and development efforts.

The common notion disseminated by international media is that the Haitian Government had no capacity even before the earthquake, and now has even less. Indeed the Presidential Palace, Parliament, law courts, and most ministerial and public administration buildings were destroyed, the silence of leadership in the days following the disaster was heard throughout the world, and it is true that Haiti has a history of government mismanagement and corruption. Yet while there is justification for people's thoughts on the current lack of capacity of the state, the tacit implication of such words is that since the state cannot manage the country, others should do so in its stead.

In Haiti this plays out in the form of organizations bypassing the government rather than including it in the planning and decision-making process for recovery. This bypassing of the Government is very problematic, particularly as the emergency phase is replaced by long-term recovery planning. Well-meaning actions that circumvent or ignore local governing bodies ultimately weaken them at a time when they are particularly in need of help. Given the historical precedent of governmental mismanagement, avoiding local and national government

is tempting for international actors. However, the ultimate effect of this is a self-fulfilling prophecy of weak government.

Luckily, the need to focus on providing assistance to the government to run its own projects seems to be increasingly recognized. During the Donors' Conference, donors pledged more assistance to increasing government capacity. We should be hopeful that they will make right on their promise. Hopeful but skeptic, as Haiti has been promised many things before.

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