

Haiti: A Once-in-a-Century Chance for Change

Beyond reconstruction: re-envisioning Haiti with equity, fairness, and opportunity

Before the devastating earthquake of January 2010, Haiti was showing signs of dynamism. However, the pre-existing extreme levels of poverty and inequality exacerbated the devastation. Haiti's reconstruction, if badly managed, will perpetuate the country's inequality, benefiting the rich and creating new risk for the poor. If well managed, it really could help to build a better Haiti.

The goal of reconstruction now must be a genuinely more equitable Haiti, in which poverty and instability are reduced. The way to achieve that is through reconstruction led by Haiti's government and other institutions, genuinely accountable to all Haitians. The international community must commit itself now to support that effort in the arduous years of reconstruction that lie ahead.

Summary

No disaster is completely natural. The devastating earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010 was no exception. Haiti's extreme levels of poverty and inequality exacerbated the devastation and determined who was vulnerable.

Haiti does not just need to be reconstructed, but in the words of Oxfam's partners in Haiti, 're-envisioned', too. Before the earthquake, 80 per cent of Haiti's population lived on less than \$2 per day. In rural areas, the figure was 90 per cent. Nearly 60 per cent of the population was undernourished, and one child in four was stunted as a result.

Now nature has compounded these woes. The earthquake is the largest in proportional impact that any country has ever experienced. It could cost US\$13.9bn and take 10 years to rebuild the country.

Badly managed, reconstruction will deepen Haiti's suffering, benefiting the better-off more than the poor, perpetuating inequality, and creating new risks.

But, if well handled, reconstruction can turn the aid industry cliché of 'build back better' into reality. Elsewhere, disasters have sometimes been the harbingers of profound social and economic change. The question is: what do Haitians need in order to recover from the earthquake in a way that can address the problems Haiti has faced for decades?

Oxfam's 32 years of experience in Haiti, 60 years of experience in disasters, and discussions with its long-term partners in Haiti, suggest that the reconstruction effort needs to meet three

vital conditions. First, Haiti's government and other Haitian institutions must lead the reconstruction. Second, as they do so, they must be genuinely accountable to all Haitians, including civil society. And third, every Haitian must be given the information they need to make informed decisions on their future. This report sets out recommendations for how to meet these conditions.

Government leadership

Perhaps understandably, strategic leadership from the government of Haiti has been slow in coming. Since disaster struck, it has been slow to make decisions and has been thus far unable to articulate and communicate a vision for the reconstruction of the country. But the government has done well in other areas, quickly supporting people who wanted to return to rural areas; allowing people and goods to enter the country tax free; and facilitating the humanitarian response.

Some of Haiti's civil or local government institutions have also proved well able to respond. The strength of local government, local communities, and their organizations and churches has sustained much of the population of Haiti. Reconstruction efforts need to involve and further strengthen such grassroots initiatives, build on decentralisation efforts, and support local government.

Corruption is both cause and consequence of the weakness of the Haitian state. The Prime Minister of Haiti told Oxfam that he had, 'no illusions about the perception of corruption and inefficiency' in Haiti. Tackling corruption and increasing transparency and accountability at all levels must be integral to the reconstruction effort.

International support

In the arduous years of reconstruction that lie ahead, Haiti needs the dramatic upsurge of international support since 12 January to endure. But it needs that support to be well directed, as well as substantial and sustained over time. Only Haitian ownership, leadership and engagement – not just of the government, but of civil society (NGOs, academics, youth groups, trade unions, displaced communities) and the private sector – can establish the reconstruction process as legitimate in the eyes of Haitians, and ensure that aid is dispersed according to real need, rather than donor preference.

To date, the UN, like the government itself, has shown little strategic leadership, failing to make the most of considerable Haitian expertise. Since the earthquake, most UN coordination meetings are held in English, rather than French or Creole, effectively excluding many local NGOs and other Haitians both from contributing their local knowledge and experience and from building their own capacity to contribute to Haiti's long-term future.

Urgent needs

Shelter

As a result of the earthquake, approximately 1.2 million people are currently living in temporary shelters in the greater Port-au-Prince area. Tremendous efforts have already been made by the humanitarian community to meet their needs, but now those efforts must be redoubled in advance of the rainy season.

Sanitation and public health

Before the earthquake, only 19 per cent of the population of Haiti had access to improved sanitation. Now, with more than one million people living outside of their homes in cramped

conditions, sanitation could be a major factor affecting public health in the rainy season, which lasts from April to June and again from August to November. Oxfam and others are working together to ensure that drainage channels are cleared, solid waste is disposed of properly, and people in camps use healthy sanitation methods. And all sanitation actors must concentrate their efforts to ensure that poor sanitation and waste disposal does not lead to poor public health.

Building back better means tackling both long- and short-term housing and infrastructure needs. Previous earthquake responses suggest that it will take years to rebuild Haiti. Even before the earthquake struck, 80 per cent of city dwellers lived below the poverty line, most of them in slum and squatter settlements lacking basic services like water, decent sanitation, and clear tenure status.

Remember rural Haiti

Urban reconstruction must not come at the cost of rural neglect. The rainy season coincides with the beginning of the planting season for rice and the height of Haiti's 'lean' season (*periode de soudure*). Urgent action is needed to support the majority of Haitians who depend on subsistence farming.

Gender matters

Reconstruction provides an opportunity to improve significantly the situation of Haitian women and to harness their energy and potential. In a profoundly unequal society, women are subjected to all forms of gender-based violence, including an alarmingly high level of sexual assault and rape. Oxfam's initial assessments suggest that women continue to be vulnerable to violence in the camps.

Donors and government need to increase the participation of women in the reconstruction, from the community level to the highest reaches of government; and to develop women's greater economic capacity through the design of projects that enable them to participate on an equal basis with men, for example through appropriate childcare and support structures, training and capacity building.

Building back better

Haiti was showing signs of new dynamism and hope before the earthquake. The preceding 10 months was a period of relative calm and stability in Haiti. There was a decline in kidnappings, incomes rose, and unemployment fell.

The earthquake itself is throwing up new generations of young leaders. Like the committee of young leaders who emerged at the Delmas 62 camp to help the hundreds of people camped in the yard of a private compound. As one of them, Stephan Durogene, commented, 'I didn't know I had this in me. It's during the earthquake I realized I can be a good leader.'

If the reconstruction listens to and strengthens the voices of people like Stephan, Haiti can indeed build back better.

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