

Haiti two years on: Beyond relief, beyond belief

By Phillip Wearne

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The following article is the most thorough and informative article written on the second anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti. Another excellent article in the same issue of New Internationalist examines earthquake aid funding to Haiti, [Where did all the money go?](#)-- CHAN editors.

The earthquake in Haiti on 12 January 2010 proved so devastating partly because the country's development model had failed so completely. Now those funding the reconstruction of the country are pursuing the same disastrous path, as Phillip Wearne explains.

'This is my house,' says Wilson Sylvie almost proudly, as he stops to glance at the patchwork of cardboard, salvaged wood, and rice sack walls before pushing aside the torn bed sheet door. 'Ten people sleep here,' he says, inside the three-metre-square shack.

How? Wilson pulls down various pieces of odd shaped plywood and cardboard to demonstrate how his family bed down for the night. Two years on from one of the world's most deadly natural disasters, the earthquake of 12 January 2010, this is life for nearly 550,000 Haitians, those known as internally displaced people (IDPs).

According to the UN agency tracking the IDPs, in the past two years nearly one million have left the camps that sprang up on every available square metre of space in Port-au-Prince following the earthquake, which killed an estimated 220,000 people.¹

No-one keeps track of where they have gone the aim here is to show 'results' in closing down camps, not the consequences of such a strategy. Many have returned to badly damaged, unsafe structures; some are housed in the transitional T-shelters springing up where rubble has been cleared, and some have just formed other 'unofficial' (read, 'uncounted') camps.

What is clearer is why they have gone. Threats and violence from landowners and even municipal officials determined to 'cleanse' occupied space (in the words of one local mayor) have seen tens of thousands evicted in total defiance of Haitian law. A much smaller number have accepted small cash sums from landlords or officials to move elsewhere anywhere else.

It all demonstrates that the abiding truths about Haiti are the same post-earthquake as they were before it. The disaster was what doctors call ‘acute on chronic’. In other words, the pre-existing condition a desperate lack of housing, sanitation, healthcare, education, all made much worse by the earthquake has now, post-relief, to be confronted, if not treated. Haiti is, in one UN official’s words, ‘a humanitarian problem for which there are only development solutions’.

The issue is what kind of development: by whom, for whom, with whom. Haiti has been ‘in development’ for more than 50 years and the overwhelming evidence on every available measure is clear: complete failure.

There have been two models in the past five decades: the crony capitalist kleptocracy and ruthless repression of the Duvaliers, followed by the unadulterated neoliberal economics forced on the successive administrations of Presidents Jean-Bertrand Aristide and René Préval. Both models have been funded by Western donors in other words, by European and North American taxpayers. Both have spectacularly failed the vast majority of Haitians.

Within metres of the Sylvie family’s home you can examine the symbols and symptoms of three different competing development models. Here is all Haiti’s past, present and every possible future.

Wilson’s shack is in Jean-Marie Vincent Park, a public space named after a liberation theologian priest assassinated in 1994 for his unbending commitment to a people-centred, pro-poor development vision. There were squatters here before the earthquake, just a fraction of the estimated 2.5 million who, out of sheer desperation, have fled the Haitian countryside for Port-au-Prince over the past three decades.

The scale of this migration, a combination of both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors, has been dramatic even by developing world standards. In 30 years, the population of the ‘Republic of Port-au-Prince’ as Haitians label their absurdly centralized state, grew fourfold. As the peyi andeyò ‘the world outside’, but more accurately translated as those beyond the pale came to Port-au-Prince, the city, confined by sea and mountains, became one of the most densely populated, unplanned, anarchic conurbations in the world.

Informal slum settlements or bidonvil sprang up on the denuded mountains and in steep ravines where death from landslides and flash floods during the rains and hurricanes was a residential hazard. Construction controls were non-existent, seismic standards unheard of. The natural disaster took 35 seconds, but the unnatural disaster that created the barely imaginable death toll, as cement-block, one-room homes became family tombs, was 35 years in the making.

Key facts about Haiti

Population (millions): 10.1. Dominican Republic is 10.1, Cuba 11.3, US 313.1

GNI per capita: \$1,123. DR is \$8,087, Cuba \$5,416, U.S. \$43,017

Life expectancy (years): 62.1. DR is 73.4, Cuba 79.1, U.S. 78.5

Under-5 mortality (per 1,000 live births): 87. DR is 32, Cuba 6, U.S. 8

Adult literacy: 48.7%. DR is 88.2%, Cuba 99.8%

Average annual deaths from natural disasters, per million population (2001-2010):

66. DR is 9, Cuba 0, U.S. 1

Source: UN Human Development Report, 2011

Today, some of the rubble from those shacks that clung to the hillsides is being recycled by the residents of Jean-Marie Vincent as hardcore for the narrow paths that snake between the shacks and tarpaulins. Everywhere you look, the camp is a hive of activity and organization. For by far the most significant humanitarian effort since the earthquake has been the one you never hear about outside the country: Haitian to Haitian. Here, gwoupman katye, camp committees, build and maintain drainage ditches, organize water delivery, run health and sanitation courses.

These groups are invigorating the civil society organizations (CSOs) that have played such a role in transforming the political landscape in Haiti over the past 30 years. 'Lé ou bezwen, se ou k pou mache' 'When it's you in need, it's you who takes the first step' Haitians say of this proud self-reliance and independence.

Some of these CSOs and camp organizations are supported by the more progressive NGOs those with a past and future in Haiti, those with a vision of participatory, rights-based development. On the far side of Jean-Marie Vincent Park, a doctor's clinic in a series of canvas tents is supported by one, Partners in Health/Zanmi Lasante, whose founding principle, 'accompaniment', states its ethos. Dr Dubique Kobel, who runs the clinic with his wife, Nadège, steps aside from a long orderly queue of patients to tell his story. From a poor background, educated with funds from the Aristide Foundation, trained in Cuba, he is completely at home in the Park where his family sought refuge after the earthquake. 'These are my people I'm one of them,' he says.

The posters and slogans that decorate Dr Kobel's tents show that the cholera epidemic which has killed 6,742 and sickened more than 700,000 in the last 15 months remains a potent threat. It is hardly a surprise. An independent survey nearly a year ago showed that, despite the massive sums spent, 26.5 per cent of IDP camps had no access to toilets and 37.6 per cent no access to water.

But even that pales into insignificance against the profound negligence and incompetence that led to the epidemic. A UN investigation has concluded that there is 'overwhelming evidence' that Nepalese troops serving with the UN 'stabilization' force polluted the country's largest river system with raw sewage.

Who allowed troops from a country in which cholera was endemic, in which there had been an outbreak just weeks before they were deployed, into a country where post-earthquake conditions were ripe for an epidemic, may be revealed as part of a lawsuit demanding compensation, despite the UN's claims of immunity.²

Step outside the Jean-Marie Vincent Park, cross Airport Road and there is a different vision of post-earthquake development. Here rows of NGO and USAID-funded T- (transitional) shelters are going up wood-framed, one-room boxes with untreated plywood walls and galvanized zinc roofs.

They are actually some of the better ones, but even these, their pale Canadian lumber dazzling in the sun, look like what they are: the slums of tomorrow. 'Four rainy seasons at best,' says one shelter expert, 'and as for standing up to earthquakes and hurricanes,

well, just forget it.’ Haitians put it their own inimitable way: ‘These houses can fool the sun, but won’t fool the rain.’

Here, Haitians work to build a new community to a foreign-designed plan which has certainly not included consulting anyone living around here. The houses are transitional, but to what? Certainly not permanent housing. By the end of August, a mere 4,596 permanent homes had been built in Haiti post-earthquake with a further 12,281 planned. In the same period, 94,879 T-shelters had been built with another 113,399 planned.

‘What’s going on now is a total waste of time and money,’ says Reyneld Sanon of FRAKKA, a vociferous housing-rights coalition based on more than 30 IDP camp committees. ‘We call on the NGOs to stop building transitional shelters and invest that money in a government-run social housing programme.’

Then there is the issue of who gets a T-shelter. It is invariably those who had a house before the earthquake. Those left behind in the camps are now, as a result, the most needy the poorest, the sickest, the most unemployed. ‘For them we don’t exist,’ says Margareth Paul in one camp in Léogane, referring to the NGOs who have prioritized those IDPs with land.

As such, it is all back to the future in Haiti literally ‘reconstruction’, not just of the same, unsafe, temporary, physical infrastructure, but the same socio-economic political exclusion that went with it. ‘It’s all enshrined in their Plan,’ says Reyneld Sanon. ‘You have the right to be the same landowner, the same renter but not, of course, the same squatter. The declared aim is the status quo ante and that was a sort of apartheid.’

Opposite the T-shelter construction site, and towering over the entrance to Jean-Marie Vincent Park, is a metaphor of what could and should be: an eight-storey block of public housing, with more than 60 apartments. Pointing skywards in aspiration, it stands out like a sore thumb, not just in Haiti but more notably here in a poor neighbourhood surrounded by shacks. This is one of two public, low-rent housing blocks that the Aristide government found the money to build. It survived the earthquake totally unscathed.

As such the concept and the construct proves its permanence, just as the T-shelter model demonstrates the opposite. If transitional, the wood-framed, plywood T-shelters must, by definition, be unsustainable. If designed and built by NGOs or USAID, the project is by definition unaccountable to Haitians. If private, it will not address the necessities of those most in need.

With development, in Haiti as elsewhere, the practice is the policy is the product and vice versa. The way you treat the sick child today, the way you shelter the family tomorrow, will determine whether the same can or indeed needs to be done in the future. ‘Aid modalities chosen today will have direct effects on the governance, capacity and accountability of Haiti for years to come,’ as Angel Gurría, the Secretary General of the OECD, noted just weeks after the earthquake.

It is not looking good. The constant complaint about Haiti is that the government does not have the capacity to deliver the most basic services. But the constant conclusion of all the available research and experience shows that in Haiti, as elsewhere, the only way you develop that capacity is to channel funds through local ministries and services.

And that is exactly what is not happening in Haiti. Even before the earthquake, Haiti was believed to be home to nearly 10,000 NGOs, the second highest number per capita in the world. Each was working to their own definition of humanitarian aid and development if indeed they had one at all. However, they were not just the product of altruism and glaring need. Many were products of policy but not Haitian policy.

Blaming lack of capacity, corruption and inefficiency, for the past two decades, major aid donors have increasingly bypassed the Haitian government. Instead, they channel funds through multilateral agencies or NGOs, some of whom are simply products of this growth industry, and thus, by definition, being government-funded, not NGOs at all.

The primary reason was politics, with a large dose of hypocrisy. Funneling ‘budget support funds’ to the Duvalier dictatorships was never a problem, however much was overtly stolen. But when Haitians began to reject Washington’s presidential candidates in free elections from 1990 onwards, bypassing and destabilizing Haitian governments became the reflex norm. Funding NGOs and hand-picked corporations to administer aid or lead development was another multi-pronged means of forcing weakened governments to accede to destructive neoliberal economic policies that the electorate had emphatically rejected reversing, perverting and discrediting democracy in the process.

The hallmarks of this neoliberal plan were universal the slashing of import tariffs, privatization of public assets and services, deregulation, minimum-wage-if-you’re-lucky assembly plants. But the effects in a country as impoverished, dependent and vulnerable as Haiti, were even more devastating than elsewhere. The estimated 85 per cent of Haitians who live on less than the minimum wage have a nickname for this: the American Plan or, more tellingly, plan lanmò the Death Plan.

Nowhere is the reality of a Death Plan more evident than in food security and one key architect of that policy, Bill Clinton, no less, admits it. In just 33 years, Haiti has gone from being self-sufficient in rice, sugar, poultry and pork to being the largest importer of US foodstuffs in the Caribbean. It has been a scandalous decline, pushing Haiti to the bottom of the global food security league, despite its fertile land and abundant rainfall. In 1995, for example, import tariffs on foreign rice were slashed from 35 per cent to just 3 per cent. Unable to compete, Haitian rice producers, large and small, gave up, throwing thousands out of work, many of whom, of course, ended up in the bidonvilles of Port-au-Prince.

Appearing before the US Foreign Relations Committee in March 2010, Bill Clinton, by now UN Special Envoy for Haiti, issued a major mea culpa on import tariffs. ‘It was a mistake I have to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed these people. Because of what I did. Nobody else.’

Haitians are now, of course, terrifyingly vulnerable to international food price spikes. When the global price of rice quintupled in 2007-08, serious food price riots broke out, bringing the government down. Yet the rice import tariff cut was just the most celebrated episode in what many see as a long war on the Haitian small farmer in particular and Haitian agriculture in general.

‘We need to get away from the idea that this is benign neglect. What we have seen here in Haiti in the countryside has been a holocaust,’ says Chenet Jean Baptiste, a visibly

angry long-time peasant organizer. ‘The gas chambers have been the Kreyòl pig eradication programme, import tariffs, environmental destruction and land evictions. We desperately need protection, rehabilitation and land reform as part of an integrated, expansive agricultural extension programme.’

Raymond Offenheiser of Oxfam argued in 2010 that Haiti is ‘Exhibit A’ in how not to do development and a prime example of why is the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission (IHRC), which Bill Clinton co-chaired. Devised by McKinsey management consultants, the theory underpinning reconstruction in Haiti is based on the same failed neoliberal economic model. The practice is based on donors’ dominance, with the Haitian government bypassed and ignored.

‘Look, you have to realize the IHRC was not intended to work as a structure or entity for Haitians,’ says one IHRC consultant. ‘It was simply designed as a vehicle for donors to funnel multinationals and NGO project contracts.’ The results of this basic fraud were predictable. Belt-and-braces basic needs, rubble clearing, low-cost housing, agricultural extension projects, basic sanitation did not ally with donors’ desires for sexy mega-projects that they could, in one wag’s words, ‘put national flags on’.

Few bodies can ever have been run so completely counter to the donor-recipient development best practices agreed in the Paris Declaration of 2005 or the subsequent Accra Agenda for Change of 2008. Ownership, alignment, harmonization and mutual accountability were all ignored in the 18 months the IHRC ran reconstruction in Haiti, as donors authorized their own thing, to their own agenda, to their own definition of transparency.

No project epitomizes this disaster capitalism more completely than the \$178-million textile assembly plant complex approved by the IHRC in December 2010 for the Caracol Valley in the north of the country. Underwritten by the US taxpayer and the Inter-American Development Bank, it epitomizes the dead-horse neoliberal economic model that donors keep flogging to Haiti despite its having reaped such devastation in their own economies.

First, even plant owners admit that the minimum wage (150 gourdes a day, about \$3.50), even if paid, is not enough to support an individual, let alone a family. Second, relying on imported raw material and exporting the product mean there is no stimulation of other domestic sectors. Third, profits are expatriated and are tax-free so there is no gain to the state. Fourth, the assembly plant sector in the region is actually contracting the only way Haiti can compete is by a race to the bottom in terms of wages and conditions.

The new industrial park in Caracol epitomizes the continuing war on agriculture. With stunning symbolism, it is being built on what locals assert is the most fertile land in the department, whose river and pristine bay eight kilometres away seem unlikely to survive the plant’s dye pollutants and waste.

‘We grew a lot of plantains, beans, corn, manioc,’ Pierre Renel, the leader of 300 farmers who have lost their land, told Ayiti Kale Je, a Haitian grassroots media outlet recently. ‘That’s how families raise their children, educate their children. It’s like our Treasury.’

On 29 November, Bill Clinton turned up in Haiti for the first time in months to cut into that rich soil and inaugurate the grandly titled Industrial Park of the Northern Region,

stripping the Caracol Valley of its name and identity in the process. “This will be the match that strikes a fire and gets things going,” he told the Wall Street Journal. He meant the Haitian economy, not the second Haitian Revolution, I think. Haitians may think otherwise.

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Notes:

1. The 220,000 figure comes from the Disasters Emergency Committee, though other estimates have ranged from 158,000 to 317,000. It is part of Haiti’s tragedy that no-one actually knows and no-one is counting. One thing I do know is that the mass grave at Titanyen is beyond anything I have ever seen.
2. For the record, the name of the UN Peacekeeping Team Leader for Haiti in New York is Ugo Solinas (for more on the legal case, see ijdh.org).

This article and much more information on Haiti is available at:

www.canadahaitiaction.ca

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