RELEASE IN FULL

Beyond the Earthquake: A Wake-Up Call for Haiti

Alex Dupuy
Department of Sociology
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06457

Long before the powerful 7.0 magnitude earthquake (and several aftershocks) struck Haiti on January 12 and leveled the metropolitan capital city of Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas, that city was already a disaster waiting to happen. With a population of more than 2 million in a city whose infrastructure could at best sustain a population of 100,000, the local and national public administrations simply abandoned the city to itself. Neither provided meaningful services of any kind—schools, healthcare, electricity, potable water, sanitation, zoning and construction regulations—and what they did provide was poorly administered, or primarily served the needs of the wealthier or better off sectors of the population who could afford to pay for them. Consider, for example, that only about 28 percent of Haitians have access to health care, 50 percent have access to potable water, and 10 percent have electrical services. In short, the Haitian state—i.e., the government—long ago abdicated its responsibilities to the majority of Haitian citizens, and at least since the Duvalier era, deferred to bilateral and multilateral aid donors, non-governmental agencies (NGOs) to provide services to the population. More NGOs per capita operate in Haiti than in any other country in the world, and they provide 70 percent of healthcare in rural areas and 80 percent of public services. This, in turn, has led to an extreme *laissez aller* and the near total privatization of all basic services. Except for a brief seven month attempt in 1991 that ended in a bloody coup d'état against the democratically elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the turn to democratic governance has not changed that basic reality. It is therefore no accident that while the earthquake caused death and destruction among all social classes, the high death toll—estimates run from as low as 10,000 to a high of 200,000 so far, which means no one really knows—is also a direct consequence of the poor infrastructure, inferior housing construction, and the long-standing disregard for the basic needs and rights of the population.

What's more, geologists had warned the government of the probability of a seismic eruption for years, but as with previous massive destructions and loss of lives caused by hurricanes and tropical storms, the government took no measures to prepare for that possibility. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Haitian people have to rely entirely on the international community to come to its rescue. This would have been the case even if the symbols of government authority—the National Palace, the Parliament, the headquarters of the National Police, and other ministries—had not been destroyed for the simple reason that the capacity of the Haitian state to respond to a crisis of this magnitude—or even to less severe ones—is non existent due primarily to shortsighted practices and policies—political, economic, and social—that prioritized the interests of the few—the 4 percent of the population who hold 66 percent of total assets and the 1 percent who appropriate 55 percent of the national income—at the expense of the 75 percent of the population who live on less than $2/day and the more than half who live on less than $1/day.

There is no doubt that the dominant economic and political classes of Haiti bear great responsibility for the abysmal conditions in the country that exacerbated the impact of the earthquake (or of hurricanes or tropical storms). However, these local actors did not create these conditions alone but did so in close partnership with foreign governments and economic actors with long-standing interests in Haiti, principally those of the advanced countries—the United States, Canada, and France—and their international financial institutions (IFIs)—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank. Since the 1970s and under various free market mantras, these international actors and institutions sought to and succeeded in transforming Haiti into a supplier of the cheapest labor in this hemisphere for foreign and domestic investors in the export assembly industry; in dismantling all obstacles to free trade; in privatizing public enterprises; and in weakening further the institutions of the state through policies that reinforced Haiti's dependence on foreign aid organizations—governmental and non-governmental.

These policies had drastic consequences for the Haitian economy. Locating the assembly industries primarily in Port-au-Prince encouraged migration from the rural areas to the capital city, contributed to its bloated population and sprawling squalor, and provided a never ending supply of cheap labor for those industries. At the same time, removing tariffs on food imports were detrimental to Haitian agriculture. Whereas in the 1970s Haiti produced most of the rice it consumed and imported only 10 percent of its food needs, by the end of the 1990s it was importing more than 42 percent of its food needs, had become the highest per capita consumer of subsidized US imported rice in the Western Hemisphere, and the largest importer of foodstuffs from the US in the Caribbean. Thus, US farmers benefitted at the expense of Haitian producers. These policies, too, propelled rural-to-urban migration, with Port-au-Prince as the primary destination, as well as emigration to the neighboring Dominican Republic, the Caribbean, and North America. Haiti is becoming increasingly dependent on remittances from its immigrants, which now represent 35 percent of Haiti's GDP.

What, then, is to be done? The response of the international community—from governments, the UN, and NGOs around the world—for medical treatment, food, water, temporary shelter, and road and communication repairs—has been immediate and massive, but will need to be sustained for a longer time span if it is to help Haiti recover economically in the short and medium term. Pressure is also mounting on bilateral and multilateral aid donors to cancel Haiti's debt of some $1.15 billion.

But to be effective and long lasting, future aid must be unconditional and be given more in the form of grants than loans. To that end, the Haitian people need to rethink how the country relates to the international community, in particular the major powers and the IFIs. Basically, I would argue, Haiti needs to break with the policies advocated by the major powers and IFIs that have proved disastrous for the Haitian economy. These policies are predicated on the belief that Haiti can develop only if it remains open to the world market, relies on its comparative advantage of low-cost labor to attract foreign investments in the export assembly industry, and prioritizes the production of selected agricultural goods, such as mangoes, for export. Despite the failure of these policies to generate sustainable development, reduce unemployment and improve the standard of living of the majority of Haitians, the major powers and IFIs continue to advocate them as the solution to Haiti's chronic underdevelopment and poverty. This is shown, for example, by the report written by former World Bank economist Paul Collier for UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in 2008, and the latter's appointment of former US President Bill Clinton to spearhead that strategy in Haiti. Ignoring the evidence of the last 38 years, Collier's report calls for establishing a cluster of free trade zones for garment production beyond the two that currently exist in Port-au-Prince and Ouanaminthe, and creating such zones for the production and export of mangoes.

It is time for the Haitian people to mobilize as they did in 1990 to change the status quo, but this time by learning from the mistakes of the past and avoiding placing their faith in false prophets. As it did in 1990, an agenda for change would need to include the following:

1. Reject all the different versions of the structural adjustment policies of the IFIs that require that Haiti remove tariffs on food and other imports, privatize public enterprises, exempt foreign investors from taxes on their profits in the assembly industries, and curb social spending. Haiti could instead negotiate bilateral or multilateral agreements with those countries that are willing to provide aid without tying them to the implementation of specific economic or social policies.

2. Launch an immediate large-scale and national public works project to rebuild or expand Haiti's infrastructure, communication, transportation, public schools, public health facilities, and public housing. Here, too, Haiti could rely on bilateral or multilateral agreements to sustain this effort beyond the immediate post-crisis reconstruction now underway with foreign assistance that will focus primarily on the quake-ravaged areas.

3. Prioritize Haiti's food security and sovereignty by launching an agrarian reform, and subsidizing production for the local market as well as for export.

4. Promote the development of local and national agro-industries that use domestic inputs to produce consumer and durable goods; and support the national handicraft industry and promote its expansion on the international market.

5. Protect workers' rights, such as the right to form trade unions and the right to strike, and provide a living wage to all workers, especially in the export assembly industries.

It is obvious that these goals cannot be implemented all at once or immediately. But they must serve as the basis for a large scale popular mobilization to hold the elected representatives of the people to account and to renegotiate Haiti's relations with the international community.

Alex Dupuy is the Class of 1958 Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Wesleyan University. His most recent book is *The Prophet and Power: Jean-Berttrand Aristide, the International Community, and Haiti* (2007).