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Starfish and Seawalls: Responding to Haiti's Earthquake, Now and Long-Term
Mark Schuller
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For a list of earthquake relief efforts please visit: <http://potomitan.net/haitian-earthquake.html>

I was not in Haiti for the earthquake. Like everyone I know who has family, friends, or colleagues in Haiti, I was glued to the internet and Skype, desperate for word from our loved ones. Word began to trickle in last night. Far too many people do not have access to a cell phone (which would require electricity, both for the network and for their individual phone), to say the least about the internet. Words cannot describe the destruction that the 7.0 earthquake just outside of Port-au-Prince. The loss is frankly incalculable.

As Haitian American anthropologist Gina Ulysse has voiced, we all have a duty to respond. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122567412>

Like many people I know my urge was to rush to Haiti and offer aid. Hearing from my colleagues stuck in Haiti reminded me of the bitter truth. Unless it's part of an organized, coordinated effort, I would just be another mouth to feed, draining very very scarce resources. True, the need to offer what modest help we could, to be in contact, is understandably human. It's also a little misplaced. It is humbling to think that fluency in Kreyòl, a Ph.D, and almost a decade of direct involvement in Haiti is not as useful now as concrete skills such as medicine or civil engineering. But to go without a specific plan would be just a tad voyeuristic, if not selfish. Several students have written, worried about their families that they can't contact. What special right do I have to bear witness right now?

It may come down to feeling powerless. What, indeed, can we do? Rather than be a target, drinking the last drops of clean water, and being an extra burden on the authorities who are evacuating non-essential foreigners (yes, it's messed up that Haitian people can't even get Temporary Protected Status – the foreign passport literally means life and death), what we can do is contribute money. As someone who has studied NGOs, I have been asked several times: where should I contribute?

I wish the answer were simple. It isn't. Unfortunately many NGOs in Haiti grew up under a system of contracts and foreign patronage, and have become for good or ill the most stable and growing sector for Haiti's small middle class. Most NGOs – who have their central offices in Port-au-Prince, to facilitate coordination – have all but given up actually serving the 2.5 million people living in Haiti's capital. A notable handful do offer services, most of them microcredit or health. As anthropologist Jennie Smith and a host of Haitian scholars (e.g., Ernst Mathurin, Jean-Anile Louis-Juste, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique and Pierre Gabaud, among others) have documented, Haiti has a thriving tradition of youn-e-de-lòt (one helping the other) and konbit (collective work groups). Certainly true of Haiti's rural majority, I have also encountered this thriving collectivist spirit in Port-au-Prince, even as donors declare the capital to be "too crowded" (which I hope will not represent a eugenicist thinking) or "anonymous" and violent. Through the last time I was in Haiti this past summer signs of neighborhood associations were hopeful: collecting coins from passersby to fix a pothole, collect trash, organize "after" school youth education, etc.

So how best to tap into this wealth of social capital? Unfortunately the team of State University of Haiti students found that of the list of some sixty neighborhood associations provided by the Haitian government (Minister of Social Affairs), only 2 still existed. Upon closer examination the researchers found that NGOs and donors created the local associations when they wanted to complete a project. The stated priorities in the neighborhood differed from the projects coming from the NGOs, that no fool would

turn away if it spells resources for the neighborhood. Since the re-instatement of the constitutional, democratic order with Préval's election in 2006, NGOs have started to come back to popular neighborhoods. The results are mixed. Good projects can be completed (and maybe maintained) like trash cleanup, water taps, recycling, etc. But the top-down, project logic (sa ou fè pou mwen? What are you doing for me?) may be replacing the collectivist konbit. New NGOs may be in conflict with more established youth leaders, popular organizations and churches.

The bigger, more hidden, side-effect of the NGOization of Haiti's society is that it can undermine the elected government's ability to coordinate and plan. NGO salaries are on average three times that of their government counterparts – in a country with about one percent of people with a college degree. Commentators – particularly within the mainstream media and donor agencies – quickly point to the failures of Haiti's state. With the priorities set abroad and funds not even passing through the state, too many NGOs have become fiefdoms, cut off from both the people and the elected government. In his book *Haiti: l'Invasion des ONG (Haiti: the Invasion of NGOs)*, Sauveur Pierre Étienne said that NGOs have become the “iron of the spear of foreign governments,” in effect tools of implementing foreign policy agendas. This is classic neoliberalism (known as Reaganomics in the U.S.) – belief that the state should step aside and let the free market take care of everything.

I am a believer in collective action.. I was a community organizer for four years in nonprofits before becoming a graduate student. Yes, absolutely there are many NGOs doing good. We should support those offering very urgently needed concrete services in every way we can. To repeat Ulysse, we have a duty. No effort – as long as it is connected to the grassroots and building the destroyed infrastructure and Haitians' capacity for self-help – is too small. I hope very much to be part of such an effort within my neighborhood. Collectively we (Haitians and friends) can't throw enough starfishes back into the ocean. There are NGOs that simply have greater capacity than grassroots efforts, that are worthy of our efforts. The first urgent priority is medical aid. Partners in Health <http://www.pih.org> co-founded by anthropologist Paul Farmer has a working infrastructure that notably is not headquartered in Port-au-Prince that is still largely functioning. And their long-term effort involves training Haitian medical professionals and working with the community. Other noteworthy NGOs include Fonkoze <http://www.fonkoze.org>, a microcredit agency that is very good at getting desperately needed cash to Haiti's remotest and poorest. Fonkoze is a model of efficiency and accountability, and they have over 40 branches across Haiti. Lambi Fund <http://www.lambifund.org> stands out among the NGO community (their director and founders would chafe at the title of NGO) as having a well-thought out, grassroots structure. Their very small staff and bottom-up approach allows them to build capacity and get more of their funds to the ground, a model for others to follow.

The issue is going to be activation of local communities to ensure aid delivery. Once the rubble clears and the thousands (if not tens of thousands) of wounded are stabilized, the city of 2.5 million people (only built for 200,000) will have the very daunting problem of rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure. Most middle class people in Haiti I know probably still have food and drinking water. The lucky few have gas stoves that will last for a while. Haiti's poor majority in the popular neighborhoods, however, are likely already starving, since most have only enough food for the daily meal. The port collapsed, so importing food is hampered. The roads are destroyed, so getting food from the provinces is going to be a feat. If Haiti wasn't almost entirely dependent on foreign food aid – that U.S. and others created through their food aid and development policies and that Haitian peasants denounce as the “death plan” (see <http://www.worldpress.org/Americas/3131.cfm> or <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080602/lindsay>) – the situation would be far less grave. Haiti's capital is bloated because of neoliberal policies – including the genocide of Haiti's pig population – that destroyed Haiti's peasant economy. Where else are people to go, especially with the glimmer of hope for the low-wage factory sector offering jobs in the city?

In addition to the three NGOs offering masterful technical assistance with years of experience in Haiti noted above, getting aid to the grassroots is critical. Since most NGOs don't work in Port-au-Prince, this local connection will literally make the difference between life and death. Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees (google them, or see an action alert posted on www.potomitan.net – with a list) has an

excellent, demonstrated, organized, ability to get aid to the grassroots. Other efforts across the political spectrum do appear (I am sorry I can't personally vouch for them but other people I trust have) to have this grassroots connection: Wyclef Jean's Yele Haiti (<http://www.yele.org>) is also innovating the aid collection through Twitter. Haiti Action Committee (<http://www.haitiaction.net/About/HERF/HERF.html>) also has strong connections with grassroots groups in low-income areas affected. Brazilian NGO Vivario has built a school in Bel-Air and had ties with local groups. Apparently a group called Avaaz https://secure.avaaz.org/en/stand_with_haiti/ is sending funds to Vivario.

There will be a flowering of groups offering aid. Rather than list them all (please e-mail me at mschuller@york.cuny.edu if you know of an effort and would like it listed on our website, or if you know of a directory), I offer the following guide to selecting a group that speaks to you:

- 1) Who, exactly, is on the ground delivering aid in Port-au-Prince? How do they select partners and leaders within these groups?
- 2) What is the group's capacity to get aid to Haiti and directly to the impacted groups?
- 3) What relationships do they have with the community and community groups? Who sets the priorities? Do they have long-term partnerships or are they grasping at straws in the – understandable – need to do something?
- 4) What percent of funds will actually get to Haiti? What percent is overhead?
- 5) What is the plan? Does it address the current needs (medical first, food, water and shelter)?
- 6) If there is a group donating to local partners, and you can donate directly to the local partners, do so (though you may need to through a 501(c)(3) group like Lambi Fund, Fonkoze, or Vanguard Public Foundation).

There are of course the bigger groups – the Red Cross <http://www.icrc.org/> and the U.N. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocusRel.asp?infocusID=91&Body=Haiti&Body1=> that can do much more.

In addition to our starfish efforts we need to build seawalls. 2.5 million people will need to be able to attain the means for food, clean water, and a safe home. Not only for today but for a long time coming. Only a strong, centralized, effective, democratic, and accountable government can coordinate this. Given Haiti's social exclusion (witness the barring of Haiti's political party with the largest political base from Haiti's poor majority from the upcoming elections) I fear that the temptation will be to impose a top-down, militaristic, "efficient" model that favors the elite and middle class and will be personalized (patronage or corrupt). If you're not Haitian, trust that Haitian people are demanding such a response from their government.

If you're foreign, there are some solidarity efforts that people in Haiti are asking (for one example see <http://isla.igc.org/Features/Haiti/ChalmersEsp.html> - you can translate into English) and some very good policy suggestions from longtime Haiti solidarity, civil rights attorney Bill Quigley <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2010/01/14-11>. One particular urgency is to offer life-saving Temporary Protected Status to some 30,000 Haitian refugees – visit <http://www.transafricaforum.org/action-center/urgent-action/tps-haitians-jan13-10> for more information.

From the neoliberal pull-and-push policies that saw a fivefold increase in Port-au-Princes population in two decades, to the centralization of all powers in Port-au-Prince, foreign governments have had some role in creating the problem. We as citizens of whatever country have a role in the solution. A true decentralization, and restoring governing powers to the elected governments of Haiti are now urgent priorities. Perhaps we will learn the lessons of the past and ensure infrastructure to Haiti's poor majority, Haiti's shantytowns, and other low-income neighborhoods. Perhaps also we will learn the need to develop Haiti's national production so it can feed itself, and have electricity and clean water, on its own.

I do have hope. My friends and colleagues in Haiti are community-oriented, strong-willed, and very resourceful. This tragedy forcibly reminds us of the necessity to humbly rethink how we relate to one

another, having a development aid based on solidarity and rights, not short-term national interest. There are a host of Haiti solidarity organizations to become involved in, and action alerts to sign up for. A short list is available at <http://www.potomitan.net/resources.html>.

And in the mean time, if you are a medical professional, please consider lending your talents, and if not, generously contribute.

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