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Haiti Six Months On

Haiti, Internal Displacement, Housing, Human Rights

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JULY 12, 2010 — It's now been six months since the devastating Haitian earthquake which left more than 200,000 people dead, more than a million homeless and a massive reconstruction task ahead. While others are assessing the relief effort and planning long-term recovery programs, in this short article we would like to comment on one particular aspect of response to the Haitian earthquake which has received little attention in the media and which bridges the immediate relief and long-term reconstruction efforts: the question of temporary shelter and permanent housing. A focus on housing also contributes to a better understanding of Haitian displacement, of economic pressures that might impinge on long-term recovery and the particular challenges of reconstruction in an urban context.

Displacement

About a million Haitians lost their homes in the earthquake, either because they were either totally destroyed or left uninhabitable. Some Haitians camped near their property in Port-au-Prince, but almost 600,000 urban Haitians moved to the countryside and smaller cities. This is not unusual. Natural disasters typically cause population displacement. Earthquakes and tsunamis destroy houses, leaving people homeless. While most displacement caused by disasters is temporary and people eventually return to their communities, finding solutions can take a long time, as evidenced by both Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 where large numbers of people remain displaced years after the disasters struck. Almost always, the displacement caused by natural disasters is internal – that is, people usually do not cross an international boundary when they're displaced by floods or earthquakes, but remain within the borders of their country. They are not refugees, but internally displaced persons (IDPs). The UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement set out the responsibilities of national authorities and international organizations to hold up the rights of those displaced by natural disasters.

The displacement of large numbers of Haitians to areas outside of Port-au-Prince obviously reduced the pressure on the aid effort in the capital. But experience has shown that host communities can be overwhelmed by the arrival of destitute IDPs. Welcome wears thin when relatives stay too long and relief is insufficient. And there is a reason why Haitians have historically migrated from rural areas and small towns for the capital. Rural areas are impoverished and jobs and livelihoods are lacking. Schools, clinics and public services are in short supply. The arrival of IDPs puts pressure on local governments to provide additional water, find additional classroom space, and collect more trash. There can be resentment when the displacement drags on and there's a perception that some people are receiving more assistance than others. International assistance for those displaced with host families was slow to arrive as the bulk of the aid efforts was centered in and around Port au Prince.[\[1\]](#)

Traditionally there are three solutions for IDPs: they can return to their communities, locally integrate in the area to which they have been displaced or settle elsewhere. The jury is still out on what will happen to those Haitians who have moved

to the countryside. Will they return to Port-au-Prince? Will they settle where they are? Will they move on? If there are no apparent solutions, will they seek to leave the country as so many Haitians have done over the years? Research^[2] shows that some of those displaced to the countryside have already returned to Port-au-Prince because of easier access to aid and better economic opportunities. This too is consistent with experiences after other disasters where people move to communities where they can find assistance and livelihoods. After Hurricane Mitch many Central Americans were resettled in areas which were safer and provided with housing, but they moved back – or moved on – because livelihoods were lacking.

Shelter

As is always the case with internally displaced persons, shelter needs are a priority, but meeting those needs in Haiti has been complicated by the fact that urban residents were primarily affected. When a disaster occurs in a rural area, governments and international agencies can set up camps which provide shelter and which are easier to serve than populations displaced in smaller groupings. But the fact that the earthquake occurred near an urban area means there is simply no room for large-scale camps. And the present situation where hundreds of small settlements are geographically dispersed makes it difficult to serve them.

Presently the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has identified around 1200 spontaneous camps and collective centers of which 54 are large sites with over 1000 households. Some of these camps are in terrible condition. Observers speak of overcrowding, insecurity and inadequate sanitary facilities in many of the camps.^[3] For example, Thomas Johnson wrote this week, "In more than ten years of emergency relief work, I've never seen camps like those in Port-au-Prince. International standards defining what people are entitled to after a disaster are in no way being met..."^[4] It took months for agencies to distribute plastic sheeting, which served as temporary shelter. This meant that basic emergency shelter distribution was only completed after the rainy season had started. The weather conditions also take a heavy toll on the emergency shelter materials. A recent OCHA report stated that "roughly 40 percent of the 70,279 tents distributed since January 12 need to be replaced or reinforced with additional tarpaulins, and some tarpaulins need to be replaced."^[5] Predictions of a severe hurricane season this summer strike terror in both humanitarian workers and in the hundreds of thousands of Haitians whose only protection from the elements remains a plastic one.

Not only were camps overcrowded, many were also identified as being at risk of flooding, leading both government officials and relief organizations to begin planning the 'decongestion' of the camps soon after the earthquake. While the distribution of emergency shelter materials was painfully slow, the process of providing transitional shelters (the next step on the way to a permanent housing solution) is just getting started. Present plans are to build 125,000 by summer 2011. But as of the end of June 2010, only 3,264 have been built, the vast majority in rural areas. Slow rubble removal and unclear land rights have made the construction of transitional shelters in urban areas an extraordinarily difficult and slow task. Rubble is a huge problem as without its removal, reconstruction cannot begin. In many places, there is not even space for temporary shelters, which is one of the main reasons most of them have so far been built in the rural areas surrounding the town. The total quantity of rubble is estimated at 20 million cubic meters. While it is being moved at a rate of up to 300 trucks a day, at this rate, it will take years to remove it all.^[6]

A particular difficulty in rebuilding homes in Haiti is the question of land tenure and ownership. While plastic sheeting can be provided to temporary camps, relief agencies are understandably reluctant to build houses on land where ownership is not clear. Even before the earthquake, questions of land ownership were problematic in Haiti. Reportedly less than 5% of Haiti's land is officially accounted for in public land records and informal patterns of tenure and ownership are the norm. The destruction of title deeds and registry records in the earthquake (as well as the deaths of many civil servants who managed them) creates a nightmare for those trying to establish land ownership. Moreover, the issue of inheritance and sale of land is difficult because of the large-scale deaths of many landowners, raising questions of: Is

the property owner still alive, perhaps displaced somewhere? If the property owner has died, are there children entitled to land? These questions would be difficult in any place dominated by informal systems, where a large-scale natural disaster occurs. But in Haiti, the lack of government processes to decide and enforce land rights, makes resolving the question a morass. As time goes on, further disputes between owners and squatters are likely and there are already reports of land grabbing. Local businesses trying to rebuild find it difficult to get bank loans without proof of ownership. Investors are understandably reluctant to invest when they can't be sure about who has title to the land. Many relief agencies working in the 1200 makeshift camps have developed informal ad hoc agreements with local authorities and landowners to provide land for settlements for a few months, but these are not durable arrangements and good will is bound to dissipate with the passage of time. [7]

OCHA has called for a national policy or guidelines on land use to allow legal construction of transitional shelters. [8] The government and aid organizations have tried to encourage people to leave camps and move back to houses that have been assessed as safe, but this has been painfully slow. "Of the 188,383 destroyed or damaged homes, only 66,967 have been assessed for safety so far," according to OCHA. "Of these, 42 percent have been deemed safe for reoccupation, but only half of those have actually been reoccupied, mainly because people no longer have money to rent." [9] People also fear that they would lose access to humanitarian assistance once they move out of camps and many are still afraid to take their chances in moving to a building which hasn't yet been assessed as safe.

The Costs of 'Building Back Better'

"Last year's natural disasters took a great toll, but Haiti's Government and people have the determination and ability to 'build back better,' not just to repair the damage done but to lay the foundations for the long term sustainable development that has eluded them for so long."

-- (Bill Clinton, May 2009)

With over \$5.3 billion pledged at the UN donors conference in March for the next 18 months and more than US\$10 billion in total pledges for the long-term reconstruction of Haiti, funding for 'building back better' shouldn't be a problem. The estimated needs stand at \$11.5 billion for reconstruction for the first three years, so the generous pledges are close to what is needed [10]. Of course, it all depends on whether those funds are all in fact transferred and the international record on this isn't good. For example, less than half of the funds pledged in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 had been received six years later. [11] And Haiti has a long history of broken aid promises; for example, most of the pledges for hurricane reconstruction in 2004 and again in 2008 were not met. [12]

Much of the reconstruction money is intended to rebuild homes. But aid flows themselves can create problems. \$5.3 billion over the next 18 months is some 50% of Haiti's annual GDP, raising the possibility that the massive inflow of aid and the reconstruction process could lead to major macroeconomic distortions. An influx of that much money creates inflationary pressures. In Aceh, for example, generous assistance provided in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami also led to massive inflation which reduced the amount of funds which could actually be used to support the Acehese people. Prices in the capital city of Banda Aceh almost doubled in the first three years of the tsunami, with inflation rising to 41.5% in December 2005 [13]. In comparison, the inflation rate at the same time for Indonesia as a whole was 6.1%. According to Masyrafah and McKeon [14], this inflation meant that many actors struggled to deliver on their promises of assistance. Of the \$7.9 billion intended for reconstruction in Aceh, \$1.3 billion of that amount was used to cover the cost of inflation. As \$6.2 billion was needed to rebuild to pre-tsunami levels, that meant that only \$1.5 billion could be used to 'build back better.' Relief organizations had problems in meeting their reconstruction targets given the dramatic increases in construction costs.

Last year, inflation in Haiti was very low, only .4% -- most likely the result of the declining growth and global economic crisis as inflation had been much higher in previous years (8.5% in 2007 and 15.5% in 2008). Predictions for 2010

show that inflation is projected to be between 10 and 20%.^[15] Even though it is unlikely that inflation will rise as quickly as it did in Aceh given the generally low international inflation environment, inflation will undoubtedly impact on the reconstruction process and also make conditions harder for Haitians struggling to get by.

The highly unbalanced distribution of economic activity, with over 65% of economic activity and 85% of fiscal revenue concentrated in Port-au-Prince before the earthquake,^[16] makes decentralization a pressing matter but also underlines that recovery in Haiti will to a large part be measurable on how the reconstruction efforts in Port-au-Prince develop.

Urban Disaster

Haiti was, above all, an urban disaster and the humanitarian community is beginning to recognize that urban disasters create particular difficulties in comparison with rural areas and also that urban disasters will become the norm in the future. Out of an estimated 9 million Haitians, some 2-3 million people live in Port-au-Prince – a city that was constructed to house a fraction of that number. Globally, urbanization is, of course, a well-recognized fact of life. Half of the world's population, some 3.3 billion people, currently live in urban areas – a figure that is expected to rise to 5 billion by 2030. 80 percent of these urban dwellers will live in the developing world. One billion people, one-third of the urban population, currently live in slums.^[17] While the world's mega-cities are the most obvious manifestation of this trend, over half of the world's urban population lives in cities of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants – cities which are often least-equipped to deal with the pressures of urbanization, the growth of urban violence or natural disasters.

While discussions about weak governance and fragile states usually emphasize the capacity of the national government, the reality is that municipal authorities are particularly important in disaster response and they are particularly weak. Cities are unfortunately also violent places where the lines between urban gangs, mafia groups, and insurgents is getting blurred. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee warned that “The inter-relationship between the two [conflicts and natural disasters] will become more overt as natural events trigger political turmoil which in turn will lead to violent conflict and more natural, technological and systems failures.”^[18]

Natural disasters of the future will have a disproportionate impact on cities. “Already, around two-thirds of the world's mega-cities with populations greater than five million fall at least partly in low-lying flood-prone areas; possibly a fifth of the urban populations of the poorest countries live in hazard-prone environments.”^[19] As urban areas grow, poor neighborhoods spread into ever-more marginal land which means that when a mudslide, earthquake or hurricane occurs, poor neighborhoods are disproportionately affected. The fact that a large percentage of the world's cities are located on coastlines makes them more susceptible to hurricanes and cyclones.

Urban areas are also more difficult operating spaces for humanitarian agencies to implement programs providing health care, sanitation, water and food because of the complexity of the basic infrastructure and the high level of technical skills required to repair the damage in urban areas. While humanitarian agencies may be the principal operators in a refugee camp in a rural area, in cities there are a whole host of actors. The relief efforts in Port-au-Prince have to deal with some of the major issues arising when a disaster strikes a densely populated city in one of the poorest countries in the world.

Another issue that is important after major urban disasters is the question of urban planning. Disasters can provide a window of opportunity to improve city infrastructure, provide better housing and overall improve the living quality in a city. This would be especially important for Port-au-Prince, a city that has seen massive urban growth coupled with little urban planning in the last decades. The Haitian government has made the decongestion of the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince “through a policy of devolution and decentralization” one of the main priorities of its Action

Plan for the Reconstruction and National Development of Haiti[20] but even if decentralization (which will take time) is successful, Port-au-Prince is likely to remain the major focus point of reconstruction.

Examples from post-Tsunami reconstruction in Indonesia show that there were often conflicts between the imperative to provide housing as soon as possible and the longer time needed to come up with comprehensive spatial and urban plans. In most cases reconstruction trumped planning. The multitude of actors in reconstruction made any semblance of comprehensive planning even more difficult. There was no single approach and efforts to coordinate were difficult or non-existent. "Different organizations do planning only so far as it is directly necessary for their programmes or clusters." [21] We can expect that some of the same issues and conflicts will arise when it comes to the reconstruction of Port-au-Prince as specially difficult questions related to land-tenure and resettlement often quickly thwart urban redevelopment plans after natural disasters.

The World Bank estimates that across the world the urban population in areas with significant probability of major earthquakes will increase from 370 million to 870 million between 2000 and 2050[22]. Unfortunately after reviewing various options, the authors conclude that public policies aimed at slowing down the growth of hazard-prone cities are unlikely to succeed. But at least the Haitian earthquake has drawn attention to other vulnerable cities. The Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka (population 13 million), for example, lies dangerously close to a major fault line. A government study estimates that 80,000 buildings would be destroyed if a magnitude 6 tremor originated beneath Dhaka while a 7.5 magnitude shake from the Madhupur Fault, 140 km away, would kill 130000 people instantly. Bangladesh has a lot of experience in disaster response, particularly flooding. Bangladesh moved 3 million people out of harm's way in the wake of Cyclone Sidr, saving thousands of lives in the process.[23] But preparing for flooding in rural areas and preparing for earthquakes in a city of 13 million people are different processes. Many of the buildings are at risk. The city is densely packed, it is hard for rescue vehicles to get through, and the emergency services lack capacity.[24] On a more positive note, the government is beginning to develop an urban disaster policy, supported with funds from the UN Development Program.

Six Months Later

"Sometimes the needs are actually greater six months after a natural disaster than they are in the immediate aftermath," Walter Kälin, Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, commented back in January following the devastating Haitian earthquake.

We hope that in six months time we will be able to report that progress has been made in finding solutions for the displaced, that housing is being constructed and that the first examples of "building back better" are evident. This will only happen if the generous pledges of financial support and solidarity actually materialize and that lessons from other large scale disasters are taken into account when laying the foundation for Haiti's recovery.

In looking at Haiti six months after the earthquake, it is hard to find silver linings. But perhaps the greater awareness of the particular difficulties of natural disasters in urban areas will end up leading to action to save lives in another of the world's major cities when a disaster strikes.

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