

## REPORT: HAITI

# ‘We Bend, but We Don’t Break’: Fighting for a Just Reconstruction in Haiti



The grassroots Haitian women’s organization Brave Ayibobo meets in Port-au-Prince in February to discuss its members’ needs. The group is one of hundreds of others advocating a just reconstruction for the country.

By Beverly Bell

**A** POPULAR HAITIAN SAYING GOES, “WE ARE bamboo. We bend, but we don’t break.” This expression of resolve in the face of adversity has been in wide circulation since the January 12 earthquake, taking on even greater meaning. The number of Haitians killed by one of the most destructive disasters in world history is unknown; estimates range from 250,000 to 350,000. Just under 2 million people were rendered homeless, displaced, or dispossessed, according to the United Nations. For those already exiled to the absolute margin of survival, the socioeconomic impacts of the disaster are incalculable. In earthquake-hit areas, the vulnerable almost invariably lost some combination of

family members, homes, personal belongings, merchandise, or whatever else might have given them a little protection from hunger, suffering, and death.

Even before the earthquake, Haiti’s destitution was a marvel on the planet. The poet Jean-Claude Martineau often says in his public presentations, “Haiti is the only country to have a last name. It’s ‘the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.’” But as tenacious as oppression and deprivation have been throughout Haitian history, the country’s highly organized grassroots movement has never given up the battle its enslaved ancestors began. The movement is composed of women, peasants, street

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vendors, human rights advocates, clergy and laity, workers, and others. The mobilizations, protests, and advocacy have brought down dictators, staved off some of the worst of economic policies aimed at others' profit, and kept the population from ever fitting quietly into anyone else's plans for them.

By far the single largest force of rescuers and first responders during the quake's aftermath was ordinary citizens who responded spontaneously and without reward. Neighbors worked together to dig out survivors from collapsed buildings, usually with only their hands or whatever implements they could improvise. They unearthed corpses, set up brigades to clear rubble, and organized security teams in neighborhoods and camps.

"We've shared our pain and our suffering," said Mesita Attis of the market women's support group Martyred Women of Brave Ayibobo. "If you heard your baby in the ruins crying 'Mommy, Mommy, Mommy,' 14 people would run help you. If you don't have a piece of bread, someone will give you theirs."

The aid and accompaniment responses are based in the long tradition of solidarity that has kept this resource-poor people alive for centuries. Not long after the quake, Yvette Etienne, director of Oxfam Great Britain-Haiti, commented: "The tremendous chain of solidarity of the people we saw from the day of the earthquake on: That is our capacity. That is our victory. That is our heart. From the first hour Haitians engaged in every type of solidarity imaginable—one supporting the other, one helping the other, one saving the other. If any of us is alive today, we can say that it's thanks to this solidarity."

Beyond the immediate aftermath, family members, neighbors, and strangers have assumed the bulk of caregiving for hungry, wounded, homeless, and abandoned survivors. In areas directly damaged, as well as those to which survivors have fled, people have pooled their time, belongings, and funds. They have shared food, sheets, and tarps; looked after the injured and ill; provided child care; given money for medicine; kept a protective eye out for women and children who are at a high risk of being assaulted; and taken in orphaned and abandoned children.

Judith Simeon, an organizer with peasant and women's groups, echoed what many of the others said: "Everyone was helping everyone. What people had, they shared with others. It was truly those who had nothing who did the most. It was our citizen obligation to take care of those who needed it."

But given the magnitude of the disaster, these efforts by ordinary Haitians have not been enough to help ev-

eryone. Neither has international aid, which, according to hundreds of interviews and months of observation, has yet to significantly address any of the needs of vast swaths of earthquake-hit populations. Although a remarkable \$9.9 billion in aid has been given or pledged by individuals and organizations throughout the world, there is a huge gap between the dollars and international posturing around aid, on the one hand, and the population in need, on the other. As of early June, hundreds of people in refugee camps reported that they had received little—some rice, perhaps a tent—to nothing at all.

In this context, some peasant, student, neighborhood, and other groups have turned the solidarity into more formal, organized programs. They are providing shelter, medical care, community mental health care, food, water, children's activities, leisure activities, security, and support for much needed agricultural production. To cite just one among many diverse responses, the peasant organization Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen in the rural region of Piatte employs a three-part strategy: taking people into their homes; bringing food to other homes that are housing internally displaced people; and bringing the fruits of their fields, like bananas and peas, to camps in Port-au-Prince.

The outpouring of community-based assistance and support is a useful reminder of the collective resilience and resourcefulness that are key to Haitian culture.

"In Haitian families, the way they socialize children, they give a lot of importance to the capacity of endurance," said psychologist Lenz Jean-François. "They teach children to always be ready for a tough situation, and to struggle to hold their dignity."

The grassroots approaches offer a different vision and practice of what *humanitarian* can mean when it is embedded in aid given with respect, dignity, and a commitment to equity. And the approaches serve as a guide to what a society that privileges mutual aid over profit, and democratic participation over domination, could look like in Haiti.

**T**HE HAITIAN POPULAR MOVEMENT HAS SET FOR ITSELF the formidable task of addressing not only the ongoing humanitarian crisis among refugees, but also the reconstruction effort as a whole. Yannick Etienne of Workers' Struggle said, "We have the opportunity as a movement to continue our organizational work, to push for social justice, and to unify the people to take change into their hands. We still have the remnants of an organized people; they didn't all die under the debris."

## REPORT: HAITI

Social movements have moved forward in creating coalitions, shaping their own alternative plans for the country's future, and mapping out their advocacy strategies. Dozens of interviews with social movement leaders and numerous declarations reveal a clearly emerging consensus. First, it includes full participation of those who are usually denied both input into public policy formation and benefit of the fruits of those policies: peasant farmers, sweatshop workers, informal-sector workers, destitute women, and others. Second, it establishes greater justice and equity as the ends of what grassroots organizations call "constructing the country," as opposed to re-constructing it, since few are served by re-creating the gross levels of mass poverty and social exclusion that existed before the earthquake.

As early as February 13 and at least on three later occasions, more than 50 NGOs and grassroots organizations devoted to a variety of issues (alternative development, women's rights) and representing various sectors (rural people, youth) met in Port-au-Prince to advance these ends. Their declaration read in part:

*[We have] decided to launch a national and international campaign to bring forth another vision of how to redevelop this country, a vision based on people-to-people solidarity to develop the opportunity now facing this country to raise up another Haiti. We [want] to build a social force which can establish a reconstruction plan where the fundamental problems of the people take first priority. These include: housing, environment, food, education, literacy, work, and health for all; a plan to wipe out exploitation, poverty, and social and economic inequality; and a plan to construct a society which is based on social justice.<sup>1</sup>*

The social movement's priorities are as follows:

1. Creating participatory democracy. This has been at the heart of demands from the moment Haiti emerged from the brutal 30-year Duvalier dictatorship in 1986; it may be more relevant today than ever. Government must serve the people, be accountable to them, and include their participation. Through many public declarations, press conferences, and, since early April, daily demonstrations, citizens are asserting that it is their right to be formally brought into decision making. Says Julie Desrosiers, a street merchant, "We need a true democracy in the country. More than just elections. We need a say in how the millions of aid [dollars] are spent, so that we the people actually benefit instead of just the big shots."

2. Rebuilding under a new economic paradigm, one that breaks free of unfair trade rules under which food and many other basics are imported, and a coveted

job is in a sweatshop earning \$3 per day. Social movements are adamant that Haiti adhere to principles of economic justice, including trade rules that privilege Haitian producers and Haitian goods, food sovereignty, employment opportunities, workers' rights, and cancellation of its foreign debts.

3. Protecting the environment. This is connected to constructing a new economic model, putting people and the earth before capital, and protecting life from commodification. Central to social movements' advocacy is tough environmental regulations for industry, which are today virtually nonexistent. Also central are solar electricity, solar ovens, reforestation, integrated water-management systems, and an agricultural system that privileges the small-scale production of diverse, organic food.

4. Putting social needs at the center. As articulated in a meeting of women from the Commission of Women Victims to Victims from their new home in refugee camps, those needs are, in a rough ranking of priority: housing, food, health care, education, and work.

5. Prioritizing agriculture. Peasant and other organizations insist that the government must invest in and offer active support to small-scale agriculture, and that foreign food aid must be

reined in to give Haitian farmers a chance to compete. They are also adamant that trade policies must protect small-farmer production to create food sovereignty, the right of a nation to produce locally for local consumption. Only 4% of the funds outlined in the Haitian government's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) are earmarked for agriculture. "The government is giving away the whole country," said Doudou Pierre of both the Peasant Movement of Papay and Via Campesina. "We are for family agriculture that respects the environment, but for that we must have government support and we must have land."

6. Ensuring women's and children's rights. In the fragile and dangerous post-catastrophe environment, social and economic rights for women and children must be front and center. According to surveys conducted by the Commission of Women Victim to Victim, rape and

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violence are escalating, so increased security is critical. Malya Villard, an organizer with the commission, said, “The government didn’t respect our rights even before the Presidential Palace was destroyed, even before the Palace of Justice was destroyed. We need those rights in the reconstruction.”

A corollary of these priorities is generating what Camille Chalmers, director of the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA), called “people-to-people solidarity, not of that solidarity that nation-states use in order to dominate the people.” Horizontal alliances will continue to be important over the coming years to help Haitians ensure full rights for all; gain different trade policy that does not undermine but develops labor rights, environmental standards, and food sovereignty; ensure that government policy privilege human need for all over profit for some; and create space for women’s full rights and power. And the voices and energy of people in the United States are especially needed to challenge the neo-colonial elements of the U.S. reconstruction plans that are blocking Haitian leadership.

**D**ESPITE THEIR ADVOCACY, THE HAITIAN PEOPLE, TOGETHER with their government, have been bypassed in the planning and oversight of how aid money is spent and in reconstruction policies. The international donors’ forums in Montreal (January 25), Santo Domingo (March 17), and New York (March 31), where the large-scale plans were developed, were led by foreign ministers and international financial institutions. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon has touted the process as “a sweeping exercise in nation-building on a scale and scope not seen in generations.”<sup>2</sup> But Haitian voices have been lost amid the declarations of the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the U.S. government, and others.

The Haitian government receives one cent of every dollar that has come in since the earthquake and is not consulted on the rest, according to the Associated Press. “The NGOs don’t tell us . . . where the money’s coming from or how they are spending it,” Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive was quoted as saying.<sup>3</sup>

On April 15, the Haitian Parliament formally ceded its powers over finances and reconstruction to a foreign-led Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti (CIRH) for the next 18 months. The CIRH’s mandate is to direct the post-earthquake reconstruction of Haiti through the \$9.9 billion in pledges of international aid, including approving policies, projects, and budgeting. The World Bank will manage the money.

Most members on the CIRH are foreign. The criterion for becoming a foreign voting member is that the institution or country has contributed at least \$100 million during two consecutive years or has canceled at least \$200 million in debt. Others who have given less may share a seat. The Organization of American States and NGOs working in Haiti do not have a vote.

The CIRH is headed by UN Special Envoy Bill Clinton and Bellerive. The only accountability or oversight measure is Haitian President René Préval’s veto power. Few expect him to use his veto, both because his record is not one of challenging the international aid apparatus and because of possible repercussions, in terms of the dollar flow, by the CIRH. According to Antonal Mortiné, the executive secretary of the Haitian Platform of Human Rights Organizations, the CIRH has made Haiti a *rèstavak*, or child slave. “This is not the path to democracy,” he said.

While the international community excludes the Haitian state from reconstruction and the Parliament even votes to exclude itself, so the Haitian state excludes its people. The government has failed to invoke even token discussions with civil society, except informally with some businesspeople and a few NGOs that do not represent a base. One indicator is the citizenry’s inability to provide input into their government’s strategic plan of long-term development based on the PDNA. The government of Haiti granted just one week, March 14–20, for “consultation with civil society and the private sector” on the PDNA. But four of those days were *after* the government approved the draft plan, on March 15.

**T**HE AGENDA FOR A JUST HAITIAN FUTURE IS MONUMENTAL in the best of times. Today it is being shaped by people who still may be accommodating themselves to the fact that their child or mother, not seen since January 12, is dead. It is being shaped by people who are living in tents in squalid, dangerous camps. It is being shaped by people who are profoundly traumatized and have no access to mental health care.

It may be that their suffering sharpens the determination to have their needs met in a context of social and economic justice and democracy. That is the perspective, at least, of Ricot Jean-Pierre, director of advocacy for the Platform to Advocate Alternative Development in Haiti (PAPDA). “Sadness can’t discourage us so that we stop fighting,” he said. “We’ve lost people as in all battles, but we have to continue fighting to honor them and make their dreams a reality. The dream is translated into a slogan: Another Haiti Is Possible.” ■



## NOTES

**Chávez Pushes the Limits**

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**'We Bend, but We Don't Break'**

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**Haiti and the Historical Construction of Disasters****Disaster Capitalism to the Rescue**

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