

# FROM DISASTER AID TO SOLIDARITY



## BEST PRACTICES IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF HAITI'S EARTHQUAKE SURVIVORS

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Beverly Bell  
Other Worlds  
April 2010

# From Disaster Aid to Solidarity: Best Practices in Meeting the Needs of Haiti's Earthquake Survivors

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# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international response to Haiti's earthquake, involving billions of dollars and led by the U.S. and U.N., comes with many problems. Notable ones are control of aid dollars, imposition of economic reconstruction plans, and militarism. Moreover, the Haitian state and grassroots have largely been denied formal opportunities to shape, or even engage in, the process.

Nevertheless, ordinary Haitian citizens are engaged in their own humanitarian aid. With no more than their own hands, their slim resources, and their commitment to community, citizens have comprised the bulk of search-and-rescue teams, first responders, and ongoing aid providers. Behind the gestures are philosophies of solidarity, mutual aid, collective resilience, and resourcefulness.

Some grassroots groups have taken the same impulses and turned them into organized programs. They are offering shelter, medical care, community mental health care, food, water, children's activities, leisure activities, and security. Some of the programs also offer education and a supportive social structure, while others provide a launching pad for community organizing to shape their country's future.

This report explores ten of these aid and support initiatives, which are only a small subset of those now underway throughout Haiti. Together, the efforts offer a different vision and practice of what 'humanitarian' means. And they serve as a guide to what a society which privileges mutual aid over profit, and democratic participation over domination, could look like.

## II. RICE AND GUNS: THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY RESPONDS

Haiti's 7.3 earthquake on January 12 had one of the highest tolls of any natural disaster in history. Hundreds of thousands – somewhere between one out of every 18 to 30 people (no accurate numbers exist) – were killed. In addition to the collective grief, Haiti struggles with vast infrastructural destruction and with the fate of 1.3 million<sup>1</sup> – or more than one in nine – who are left homeless, displaced, and dispossessed.

After watching with horror the televised images of death and suffering, common people the world over reached deep into their wallets and hearts to show their concern. For more than two months, the single largest donor source was private individuals and organizations.

As for the super-powers, a different dynamic is at work. With expressions of grave concern and billion of dollars in aid, the U.S., the U.N., and others have stepped in to save Haiti. Besides humanitarian motives, they appear to have several others. For one, the governments and the U.N. may be hoping to reclaim the moral high ground which has been long lost in the eyes of many global South nations. President Obama said, for example, "America's leadership has been founded in part on the fact that we do not use our power to subjugate others, we use it to lift them up... When we show not just our power, but also our compassion, the world looks to us with a mixture of awe and admiration. That advances our leadership."<sup>2</sup>

The 'advanced leadership' of which Obama spoke appears from the ground in Haiti much more like a three-point program of control: aid, reconstruction and development, and militarism.

### Aid

The levels of giving have been stupendous, with \$9.9 billion given or pledged by individuals, organizations, and the international community.<sup>3</sup>

But the Haitian state and people have been bypassed in the planning for how that aid is spent. 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 told the Associated Press. "Too many people are raising money without any controls."<sup>4</sup>

Even before the earthquake, it is often reported, Haiti had more NGOs than any other nation<sup>5</sup> (some reports indicate that India has more). The Haitian government had been urging those

<sup>1</sup> Government of Haiti estimate.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Why Haiti Matters," *Newsweek*, Jan. 25, 2010, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Skepticism on Pledges for Haiti," *New York Times*, March 31, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 13, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Schuller, "Invasion or Infusion? Understanding the Role of NGOs in Contemporary Haiti", *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Fall 2007, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_7607/is\\_200710/ai\\_n32256108/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7607/is_200710/ai_n32256108/).

giving aid to register with the government, and U.N. special envoy Bill Clinton articulated this as a priority in 2009.<sup>6</sup> But no such process transpired.

The international community's principal aid focus has been food, most of it rice, in operations dominated by the U.S. and U.N. The distribution is heavily militarized, though less so than in the first weeks after the quake. Then, food was given in chaos, thrown from the air in what Haitians took as an offensive indicator of fear or distrust, or thrown from trucks onto the ground. "We are not dogs," is an expression heard often in Port-au-Prince regarding the nature of this operation.

The intimidating arms and the chaos, combined with frustration on the part of the receivers and more frustration still among those who have not received, have led to violence - though limited, unlike the impression created in the foreign media. Today, in a generally calm environment, the U.S. still gives with guns, while the U.N. runs razor-edged concertina wire along the sidewalk to ensure straight lines for its distribution.

U.S. and U.N. aid trucks show up on streets at random times, forcing hungry people to drop what they are doing and run. An elected spokesperson in one camp said, "We have schedules. Why can't they?" Aid seekers then stand in long lines in the hot sun for their handouts, part of a recipe for undermining people's control over their own lives.

The indignity of the operation, and the fact that people have no say-so in how they get the food they need, could - in a worst-case scenario - turn survivors from agents of self-recovery into mere victims. At a time when Haitians must have confidence and social organization to reconstruct their lives and their country, when they need to rely upon a long, proud history of organizing - in which they liberated themselves from slavery, French colonialists, and dictators - the aid operation risks substituting their power for charity thrown from military trucks. Imported rice and tents are placed at the center of the discourse, and the people are treated as beggars.



*Food aid is actually aggravating the food crisis, sacrificing local agriculture for free rice. Haitian producers cannot compete with foreign food aid. This year's harvest of some rice growers sits, unsold, in a cooperative warehouse in the Artibonite valley. Photo: Beverly Bell.*

Another danger is that the invasion of rice and other foodstuffs from subsidized U.S. agribusiness is undermining local production, local employment, and the chance for Haiti to produce what

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Katz, "Billions for Haiti, A Criticism for Every Dollar," Associated Press, March 5, 2010.

it needs for its own consumption. This risks making Haiti more, not less, hungry. While most Haitian farmers agree that food aid has been essential in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, they cannot compete with the free commodities. Since January 12, local rice producers have been unable to sell their crops due to food aid either being distributed for free or resold in the black market for cheap. In the rice-growing region of the Artibonite, sacks of rice harvested in early March sit, unable to be sold, while Port-au-Prince street vendors report that they cannot find any Haitian-grown rice in wholesale markets.

If the aid continues as is, the long-term cost will be to destroy local agriculture, on which 60.5 to 80% of the population<sup>7</sup> depends for their income. Small producers' output has already been crippled since the 1980s by trade policies that lowered tariffs on imported food. Even before the disaster, a soup-size can of American rice could be purchased from a street vendor for 30 gourdes, while the same volume of Haitian-grown rice cost 50 gourdes. Between the destructive trade policies and lack of government support for agriculture, pre-January 12 food imports constituted only 57% of what Haitians consumed.<sup>8</sup> Recent news that the World Food Program of the U.N. and U.S.A.I.D. are moving toward procuring local rice is a good sign but is still not enough. To truly help Haitians eat, peasant and other organizations argue, aid should go toward strengthening small-scale agriculture and food sovereignty, the right of local farmers to grow for local consumption.

## **Reconstruction**

The same logic that applies to local rice applies to most every field in the reconstruction, from house building to education. Outside NGOs and 'experts' have arrived with their own products and knowledge systems. Local control, decision-making, and leadership is, for the most part, sidelined.

The policies and programs of economic reconstruction have bypassed the Haitian government and people. The international donors' forums in Montreal (January 25), Santo Domingo (March 17), and New York (March 31), where the macro-plan was developed, were led by the U.S. and other governments, the U.N., and international financial institutions. Now a \$9.9 billion reconstruction program is underway. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon touted the plan as "a sweeping exercise in nation-building on a scale and scope not seen in generations."

Haitians do not share the enthusiasm. One of many similar statements, this one signed by 24 citizens' organizations, referred to "a near total exclusion of Haitian actors and a weak and uncoordinated participation of the executive branch." The statement says that the foreign donor reconstruction plan is just the next step in a cycle of international diktats emerging from meetings "with the highest level representatives of imperialist governments, international financial institutions, and the United Nations, [which] conclude as a media spectacle which not only do not allow the emergence of new paradigms of cooperation with Haiti, but also prolong and reinforce relations of domination of the Haitian state and society."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The U.N. (2006) estimates 60.5%, while peasant groups put the number at around 80%.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> "The Position of Haitian Social Movements on the PDNA Process and the Process of 'Reconstruction' in Our Country," Port-au-Prince, March 13, 2010.

As the international community is excluding the Haitian state, so the Haitian state is excluding its citizens. The government has failed to invoke even token discussions with civil society, except informally with some businesspeople and a few non-governmental organizations who do not represent a base. As one indicator of the lack of democracy, on February 15 the government launched the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) process to evaluate the country's needs, which was intended to lead to a strategic plan of long-term national development. According to the same statement quoted above, the core plan was negotiated at a meeting in a convention center in Pétion-Ville, led by the Minister of Planning and Foreign Cooperation, "with 150 government technicians, 90 representatives of international institutions, and a strong presence of multinational organizations."<sup>10</sup> The whole process may have just been a show, since the international community holds the reins. Nevertheless, the government of Haiti granted just one week, March 14-20, for "consultation with civil society and the private sector." However, four of those days were *after* the government approved the draft plan on March 15.

## Militarism

Within days of the earthquake, 20,000 U.S. troops, 12,000 U.N. troops, 2,000 Canadians, 600 French, and more from Spain, Jamaica, Mexico, and elsewhere, were on the ground, in the sea, and in the air. Though the U.S. force has since been reduced, its original size was the exact same as that of the 1994 invasion, except that this time no executive order or congressional vote was needed.



*The remains of the Haitian ministry of health. Into the vacuum of services for a hard-hit population, the U.S. offers guns. Photo: Tory Field.*

Three points, especially, drive home the relationship between the U.S.'s foreign aid and its military presence. First, for at least two months, of every dollar that the U.S. government commits to Haiti's reconstruction, \$0.40 went to the U.S. military.<sup>11</sup> Second is the number of humanitarian aid planes that the U.S. government turned away from the Port-au-Prince airport in the days following the

earthquake, so that U.S. military personnel and equipment could enter. While many lives hung by a thread, the U.S. repeatedly denied entry to airplanes carrying life-saving medical equipment, doctors, food, and water – including Médecins du Monde flights which had prior permission to

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Katz, "Billions for Haiti, A Criticism for Every Dollar," Associated Press, March 5, 2010. Sources taken from USAID and the United Nations. See <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/haitiaid.jpg>.



land. Nine days after the quake, more than 1,400 flights of aid and relief workers were on queue, awaiting authorization to enter.<sup>12</sup> Third, of the four U.S. military boats docked off of Haiti's coast, one has recently been pulled out, while three are staying. The one that the U.S. sent away is the medical ship, the U.S.S. Comfort. The three that remain are warships.

Especially given how peaceful the environment is in Haiti (other than in the displaced people's camps where, ironically, vulnerable people cannot get the security they are desperate for), hundreds of Haitians interviewed have expressed befuddlement as to what legitimate

"We have a people who are stressed; they are traumatized by the situation. Is that a situation you respond to with arms and batons?"- Marie Berthine Bonheur

purpose this military presence could be serving. Many stated strong resentment over the disjuncture between a humanitarian crisis and a militaristic response, over having their suffering met with weapons. Marie Berthine Bonheur with the National Peasant Movement of the Papay Congress voiced common sentiments: "The soldiers have arms and batons in their hands; the Haitians have nothing. Our country is not at war. It's a provocation. Have you seen the soldiers bulldozing? No. We have a people who are stressed; they are traumatized by the situation. Is that a situation you respond to with arms and batons?"

<sup>12</sup> Report of Air Force General Doug Fraser, January 21, 2010.

### III. FROM DISASTER AID TO SOLIDARITY

U.S. Ambassador Ken Merten said, “In terms of humanitarian aid delivery, frankly, it’s working really well, and I believe that this will be something that people will be able to look back on in the future as a model.”<sup>13</sup> That opinion is not shared by earthquake survivors, according to hundreds of author interviews with Haitians from many social sectors and geographic regions.

Nineteen Haitian organizations, from human rights, media, women’s rights, peasant, development, and other sectors, issued a joint statement in which they said, “[We] oppose traditional practices in the field of humanitarian aid, which do not respect the dignity of the victims and which reinforce dependency. We are advocating a humanitarian effort that is appropriate to our reality, respectful of our culture and our environment, and which does not undermine the forms of economic solidarity that have been put in place over decades by the grassroots organizations with which we work.”<sup>14</sup>

By far, the single largest force of first responders and aid workers has been ordinary Haitian citizens. In the days following the earthquake, community members 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.

The alternative aid and accompaniment responses are based in the long tradition of solidarity that has kept this resource-poor people alive for centuries. Yolette Etienne, director of Oxfam Great Britain-Haiti at the time of the earthquake, 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.”

By far the single largest force of first responders and aid workers has been ordinary Haitian citizens.

As for the ongoing task of caring for hungry, wounded, homeless, and abandoned survivors, this has been principally assumed by family, neighbors, and strangers. Both in areas directly hit by the earthquake as well as those to which survivors have fled, people have pooled their time, belongings, and funds to share food, sheets, and tarps; look after the injured and ill; provide child care; give money for medicine; keep a protective eye out for women and children who are at high risk of violence; and take in orphaned and abandoned children.

The outpouring of assistance and support from within the community is a useful reminder of the collective resilience and resourcefulness that are key to Haitian culture. Psychologist Lenz

<sup>13</sup> State Department briefing, Feb. 12, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> “Statement by the Coordinating Committee of Progressive Organizations, Port-au-Prince, Jan. 27, 2010.

Jean-Francois said, "In Haitian families, the way they socialize children, they give a lot of importance to the capacity of endurance. They teach children to always be ready for a tough situation, and to struggle to hold their dignity." This acculturation is seen everywhere today. As foreign powers, international agencies, and the Haitian government marginalize the people from both humanitarian aid and reconstruction, the organized initiatives are a living testament that people are neither passive nor victims.

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- Yolette Etienne

The knowledge that citizens already have what they need to take their healing and rebuilding into their own hands is critical to a traumatized population. According to Roseanne Auguste of the Association for the Promotion of Integral Family Healthcare (APROSIFA), "This earthquake is a lesson for all to learn how strong we are. The majority of people we

are working with have lost their homes, have lost everything. But they continue to live with their force, their love, their solidarity."

Some grassroots groups have turned this solidarity into organized programs. They provide shelter, medical care, community mental health care, food, water, children's activities, leisure activities, security, and support for much-needed agricultural production. At times, they act with no resources other than their own commitment; at other times, they are supported by international allies.

Some of the efforts offer education and a supportive structure in which survivors can recover their lives and their dignity. Some also encourage people to engage in organizing and advocacy to shape their country's future. Logically, those impacted should be agents of change. As activist and shelter provider Tanya Felix said, "We are the principle actors in our own reconstruction."

Though the programs rely on different philosophies and methodologies, they all show how humanitarian aid programs can provide help without humiliation. Embedded in the small and local humanitarian responses is the model of a society premised on respect, democratic participation, generosity, and dignity. All the guiding principles for a new, just, and equitable nation exist here, in practice.

## IV. CASE STUDIES: ALTERNATIVES IN HUMANITARIAN AID

### Urban Responses

#### *Association for the Promotion of Integral Family Healthcare (APROSIFA)*

In the popular neighborhood of Carrefour Feuilles, the Association for the Promotion of Integral Family Healthcare (APROSIFA) has contracted with 50 *timachann*, small food vendors, from earthquake-damaged communities where APROSIFA clients live. APROSIFA contracts with each woman to purchase food and cook one large meal a day for ten or fifteen specified families – the same set each day – usually with upwards of seven members per family.

The project formally provides food for approximately 5,400 people each day, but actually provides much more. When the women finish serving those they're responsible for, they keep serving hungry people who come until the pots are empty – for free, out of solidarity. The program is financed by grants made to APROSIFA.

The food served is all domestically grown. Project organizer Roseanne Auguste said, "We don't need to have rice sent from the U.S. I would like to tell the international community that the earthquake didn't affect production in this country. We can produce food."

"What we want is for the international community, the foundations and agencies, to hear our philosophy and our dream for our people, our country." – Roseanne Auguste

One of the *timachann*'s operations takes place in the *lakou*, communal courtyard, of three extended families. In one visit by this researcher, Madame Gabeau had just finished the preparation of three industrial-sized, blackened pots containing rice, bean sauce, and vegetables. Madame Gabeau's contracted food recipients – or what she called "her family" – awaited their food in the shade of a huge mango tree, exchanging news with each other. They were neighbors, if not friends. Once the food was ready, Madame Gabeau ladled servings into the containers they handed her: lunch buckets, tin bowls, and Styrofoam to-go boxes.

The scene could hardly diverge more than U.S. and U.N. rice distribution. It is, in fact, no different than many pre-earthquake Sunday afternoons in Haiti, except that all the people here are hungry and homeless due to one of the worst natural disasters in history.

Auguste said, "We have our own vision of reconstruction of our country. We have a philosophy that corresponds to our reality, not the reality of the international community. What we want is for the international community, the foundations and agencies, to hear our philosophy and our dream for our people, our country."

## *Coordination to Rebuild the Nation (KORE N)*

The intervention of Coordination to Rebuild the Nation (KORE N, which in Creole means 'support us') has been to develop alternatives to the humanitarian relief effort, especially in the provision of medical care. KORE N's alternative is based on a model of 24/7 accompaniment of the community's health needs.

KORE N opposes the idea of mobile clinics which show up at camps once or twice a week. Though these do provide critical help, KORE N members assert, they parachute in medical staff who have no relationships in or knowledge of the community, often relying on foreign doctors who do not know Haitian maladies. People are left sitting in long lines in the heat. Also, the mobile clinics - like many of the post-disaster service projects - will end at a given point, probably long before the needs are met.

KORE N created four centers based on the idea of permanent accompaniment. The group sought out neighborhoods where there are shelters or camps and where KORE N members have influence. It located people in the neighborhoods who have basic medical knowledge, like nurses and nurses' aides - ten in all - and gave them training. It set up each locale either in a tent or in the medical staff's home, in the low-income neighborhoods of Fontamara, Delmas 2, Carrefour Feuilles, and Solino. KORE N identified doctors who could serve as resources; the on-site medical team can call them with any questions or problems. Next, the grassroots organization solicited medicines from citizens' groups.

KORE N member and doctor Rudy Prudent explained the approach. "We put out the word that Gina, an auxiliary nurse, has medical supplies in her house or in a tent. People know that if they have a problem, they can go find Gina. Gina lives in the neighborhood, they know she's trained medically, they know she's a KORE N member, they know she's an activist, they know her positions on their social problems. These are not just people who come do consultations and then run." Each of the ten medical workers has other work, and may leave the neighborhood for other purposes, but is otherwise available at any time of the day or night.

KORE N says that what's important for them is not to accompany many people, using the logic of many NGOs who need to show that they are servicing large numbers of clients in order to justify their funding or win new grants. The quality of the solidarity, not the quantity of patients, is what counts.

While providing this care, KORE N also continues its preexistent work: discussing and organizing with members of the community to develop social consciousness and unite forces, so they can resolve their social problems while trying to transform the state.

(Research conducted by Gina Vrigneau and Ricardo Toussaint.)

## *Solidarity Among Youth / Veye Yo (SAJ / Veye Yo)*

In a small front yard, a big dark hall, and a back patio, people sit in small groups or alone. The walls of the main room are lined with stacks of bundles tied in sheets, people's only remaining belongings. Above the bundles, white banners read 'love,' 'solidarity,' and 'respect.' During a

recent visit by this researcher, children played checkers, women talked amongst themselves, and a few families huddled in conversation. In a classroom, student volunteers arranged first aid supplies on shelves. Out back, a woman cooked in a little concrete building.

This humanitarian aid operation is happening in a damaged kindergarten building in the low-income neighborhood of Belaire. Each day, the group SAJ / Veye Yo feeds 400 people and

“People need to know that we can count on ourselves. We don’t lack anything; we have the capacity.” – Lenz Jean-Francois

shelters 200 people, from a bright-eyed baby to a very elderly man. They offer medical treatment and occasional sessions on topics such as anti-stress techniques and women’s health.

SAJ / Veye Yo’s resources are a combination of free truckloads of water from Oxfam Quebec and a local company, and funds given by the Haitian state and a German company. Two doctors, Haitian and German, and an auxiliary nurse fill volunteer shifts three afternoons a week. Three medical students fill in when the doctors are away. Several psychology students volunteer mental health services.

SAJ / Veye Yo has a long history with families in the Belaire community. According to co-coordinator Lenz Jean-Francois, women, parents, young children, and youth who had already been part of SAJ Veye Yo’s program appeared at the kindergarden-cum-community-center ‘spontaneously’ after January 12. SAJ / Veye Yo has been able to offer care to homeless and displaced people in a way that only organizations with sustained relationships can do.

Jean-Francois said, “People need to know that we can count on ourselves. We don’t lack anything; we have the capacity. That’s what behind this initiative. We accept support that comes, but in the framework of respecting people’s dignity.”

Co-coordinator Tanya Felix added, “The aid we’re giving is not something that foreigners can give us. It’s not soldiers who can help us; it’s people helping each other as people. That lets our dignity be respected.”

### *School of Social Sciences, State University of Haiti*

The disaster response of the School of Social Science at the State University of Haiti, according to the school’s coordinator Hancy Pierre, is not ‘aid.’ The work emphasizes the right of survivors to have their needs met “not as a favor, but as a right.”

The school relies on its faculty, students, and knowledge base, plus minimal funding, to educate the community, provide psycho-social support to survivors, and help the population respond to today’s political challenges. The school applies its four disciplines – communications, social work, sociology, and psychology – to help shape a response which can, as the slogan for the work proclaims, ‘rebuild the house.’ By this, they mean to help Haitian people rebuild themselves, rebuild their homes, and rebuild their country in ways which reinforce their strength and capacity, as individuals and as a people.

Thirty-five students from the school are offering psycho-social support to about 350 people in roughly 10 shelters in metropolitan Port-au-Prince. The program is based in an understanding that survivors do not need food alone. They need to talk, and they need to be supported in their full humanity.

The support the students offer is “promotion of collective resilience,” said professor, social psychologist, and provisional head of the psychology department Lenz Jean-Francois. “We’re building off of what we have that is positive, to encourage people to reclaim control of their lives, to reconnect their ties with others, and to find their confidence so they can resolve their problems.” The philosophy is to use the strong cultural values of resourcefulness and dignity which, according to Jean-Francois, begins with parenting that is geared to help children prepare to endure in any tough situation.

The psycho-social approach is based on five steps. They are (1) verbalization, or letting people talk through their experiences; (2) acknowledging feelings, helping people understand and express their emotional reactions; (3) discourse of the geological cause behind the earthquake, objectifying and historicizing it to take away the belief that it was sin-caused (as some religious groups have been teaching); (4) acceptance, helping people understand that though they can’t change the catastrophe, they can change their relationship with it; and (5) ‘Rebuild the House.’

Rebuild the House helps Haitian society build a positive, alternative vision for the future, and then use their collective internal strength and self-reliance to build that country. It emphasizes that citizens must be the principal actors in constructing a country based on new principles and programs.

To help achieve this, the school is hosting discussions in the camps and shelters to mobilize community members, help them organize, and help them understand the risks in the current context. All of the school’s work carries the implicit and explicit message that to succeed, Haitians must have control over their lives and their environment. Reliance on aid, they insist, will only cause Haitians to lose their confidence in themselves.

The school is also hosting a discussion series on elements related to rebuilding. Topics include the foreign debt and the domination of humanitarian aid, among others. Lastly, the school has dedicated part of its campus to giving refuge to 30 families. Pierre said, “We call them community visitors.”

(Research conducted by Gina Vrigneau and Ricardo Toussaint.)



*A rural Tèt Kole group in Piatte offers a different model of humanitarian aid. Photo: Roberto (Bear) Guerra.*

## Rural Responses

### *Heads Together Small Peasant Farmers of Haiti (Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen)*

*“Yon sèl dwèt pa manje kalalou,”* said Christroi Petit-Homme, a member of the national peasant association Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen in Piatte. “You can’t eat gumbo with one finger,” goes the Haitian expression. Peasant groups throughout rural Haiti form the fingers of the hand, reaching out with solidarity to help those left bereft after the earthquake.

Hundreds of thousands of people have fled earthquake-hit urban centers for rural areas. Some of the immigrants came to escape the dangerous and squalid refugee camps, while others spent one too many sleepless nights standing up during torrential rains. Some returned to their families in the countryside, while others simply left the decimated capital on the first bus they could find. The migration pattern is a sharp reversal of the decades-long rural-to-urban flight.

Like so many other places, the rural area of Piatte suddenly found itself receiving refugees. Four days after the earthquake, Tèt Kole, the local church, and the general population convened to decide their collective response. They adopted a three-part strategy: taking people into their homes; bringing food to other homes which are sheltering refugees; and bringing some of their harvest, like bananas and peas, to camps in Port-au-Prince.

In a meeting of the Piatte chapter of Tèt Kole, 12 of the 42 members present said they were hosting displaced people. Isaac Simellon, for example, took in seven orphans after his brother died in the earthquake. Joseph Dor has sent food to 13 people “in difficulty” in the city: bananas,



coconuts, and breadfruit from his garden, plus water that he bought. He admits it has been hard because he is already supporting his wife and four children, but said, "It's my contribution."

This hospitality is no simple matter, since the hosts are themselves on the edge of survival. Thirty-one of the 42 said they don't even have houses, since the structures – most of them made of woven sticks covered with mud and topped with dried cane stalks or banana leaves – either completely collapsed in the quake or are too badly damaged to inhabit. Fifteen said they took back their children who had been going to school in Port-au-Prince, since most schools were closed until early April.

"When we need food, people bring it. Some bring wood, some bring water. Those who only have a little change put it into a sack as a collection for other members." – Sylvain Pierre

The response in Piatte has been mirrored within Tèt Kole groups throughout the country. Sylvain Pierre, one of Tèt Kole's national coordinators, said, "Solidarity is a principle of our group. When there were massacres [against Tèt Kole members] in Jean-Rabel and Piatte, when there were arrests, when there

is work to be done, there is always solidarity. When we need political pressure, people give it. When we need food, people bring it. Some bring wood, some bring water. Those who have money, they give money. Those who only have a little change put it into a sack as a collection for other members."

### *Peasant Movement of Papay (MPP)*

In the Central Plateau, the solidarity-based response to humanitarian aid takes on new dimensions because of the volume of displaced peoples who arrived there. Extrapolations from a census done in numerous rural communes suggest that 150,000 people have relocated there, according to Peasant Movement of Papay (MPP) director Chavannes Jean-Baptiste.

Shortly after the earthquake, MPP members took up a collection of US\$519.60, and the organization's directorate contributed another US\$128. With that, MPP took 60 refugees into its guest house, both people known to members as well as strangers who showed up at their doors. MPP is providing not only lodging but also shoes, clothes, and medical and dental care; three meals a day; Internet access; and entertainment such as movies and excursions. Refugee youth have organized a soccer team, which now plays against the MPP team. MPP members took a pregnant woman to the hospital to give birth and enrolled three children back into school. They even slaughtered two of their cows so they could bring meat to patients at the nearby Partners in Health hospital.

In addition, many MPP members have taken displaced people – friends, families, and strangers – into their homes. In one example, Christianne Adrien, a street vendor, and her husband Ilson, a farmer, have taken in 18 guests, members of the extended family. This brings the number of mouths to feed in the home to 27. "If it were for money, we would never have done it," Adrien said. "Trying to find food for all of them is like being stabbed with a big knife. But since we're peasants, what we have we share so they can live, too."

When the families run out of their own funds and their own crops, MPP helps out. But MPP's resources are quickly depleting, too. Jean-Baptiste said, "We haven't gotten any financial support for this. We're happy to help now, but what's going to happen in six months?"

The cost to peasant farmers will soon be even higher, and will be borne by the whole nation, because the rural communities have been forced to repurpose the seeds they saved for the March planting season - the main planting of the year - to feed their guests. Without seeds to plant, peasant associations are warning of an impending food crisis worse than the one which is already gripping Haiti.

But MPP recognizes that the new members of their community could boost agricultural production. Their labor could help in cultivating more land and thereby feed the nation, if the government chose to provide services and other employment opportunities for rural areas. The migrants could represent the first wave in a new era for Haiti: a decentralized country, all of it treated as part of the Republic - not just Port-au-Prince.



*Hundreds of thousands throughout Haiti are being kept alive by the solidarity of strangers. Here, a displaced family has been welcomed into the home of members of the Peasant Movement of Papay. Photo: Roberto (Bear) Guerra.*

## *Long Live Hope for the Development of Cap-rouge/Vive Espoir pour le Développement de Cap-rouge (VEDEK)*

In Jacmel and its environs, many houses were destroyed and hundreds died. The few who survived were unable to find any help from the state or elsewhere. The peasant organization Vive Espoir pour le Développement de Cap-rouge (VEDEK), in the commune (geographic region) of Cayes-Jacmel, decided to support the thousands of people who were left in the streets, in hospitals, in camps.

A week after the earthquake, VEDEK visited Jacmel's general hospital and turned over an envelope of 10,000 gourdes (US\$256) that members had collected, from their own funds, to buy basic medicines and water for the wounded. According to directors of the hospital, it was the first aid that they received since the catastrophe. "It was an unprecedented gesture of solidarity," said one director.

VEDEK also sent out a call to invite other Cap-rougeoises to help more than 2,000 people who resettled from Port-au-Prince and Jacmel. From their gardens, peasants have brought roots and fruits such as corn, sorghum, beans, yams, potatoes, oranges, grapefruits, and sugar cane. They have not only fed but also lodged and provided psychological care to the survivors. They have used radio broadcasts and discussions with families in Cap-rouge to help people understand that the earthquake was a geological, not a religious, phenomenon.

In the midst of the Cap-rougeoises' mobilization of generosity, the villagers have also been trying to address the damages and losses they themselves incurred. Research led by the youth of VEDEK found that 155 houses and 150 water reservoirs were destroyed, and 602 additional houses were damaged. To clear the land and demolish the houses that posed a danger, they organized *konbits*, collective work groups, with about 40 people each.

Cap-rougeoises farmer families have also done *trok*, exchanges, with fisher families, sharing grains and vegetables for seafood. This has allowed the peasant families to augment the variety and nutritional quality of food they can offer to the displaced.

VEDEK also mobilized a campaign to get beans for planting and organic compost so the farmers could produce, and even increase their yield, both to help themselves get back on their feet and to help them feed their guests. VEDEK members contributed nine kilos of beans and 800 sacks of organic compost, which they distributed to 1,400 families.

(Researched and principally written by Jean Jores Pierrre.)

## International Responses

### *Henry Reeve Cuban Medical Brigade*

The Cuban government has sent more than 1,600 doctors to Haiti, to provide free, quality, and dignified health care in the wake of the earthquake. They hail from 25 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and the Americas, including Haiti. They were all trained in the medical schools which the Cuban government runs both in Cuba and Venezuela. Regardless of country of origin, they are known in Haiti as the “Cuban doctors.”

While some of the “Cuban doctors” were in Haiti prior to the earthquake, most of the young physicians are part of the Henry Reeve Cuban Medical Brigade. The brigade’s presence will last for two years, though individual doctors may rotate out after shorter stays. The team is working in three hospital sites around the capital, four urban health posts in open-air tents, and hospitals in other towns and rural areas. In the two field hospitals they have created in Carrefour and Croix-des-Bouquets, they provide 24-hour services, with specialty care in pediatrics, surgery, intensive care, internal medicine, and gynecology. Five vaccination teams, working six days a week, have vaccinated more than 70,000 people against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, mumps, and measles.

The brigade is a post-disaster operation that was formed to offer assistance to survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The U.S. government refused their help, but the team has since gone to Pakistan after a major earthquake, Indonesia after the tsunami, and a half-dozen or so other places which have suffered major catastrophes. In February, part of the brigade was dispatched to Chile after an earthquake hit there.



*1,600 Cuban-trained doctors are offering quality, dignity-based health care, at no charge to patient or to the Haitian government. Photo: Tory Field.*

Their flights to Haiti and their expenses are all covered by the Cuban government, and they are given a small stipend for daily expenditures, such as a soda or snack. Otherwise, they are 100% volunteer.

“We are internationalist doctors,” said Dr. Luigi Polifroni, a Colombian. “When someone asks me where I’m from, today I say Haiti. Next week, I could be from Chile.”

The free health care operation is an extension of the work of a Cuban-educated and Cuban-run team which has provided public health care in Haiti since 1999. The doctors have staffed rural clinics and city hospitals, without charge to the government or patients. Hundreds of doctors at any given time have focused their attention primarily in remote places, where people are most vulnerable in terms of health care. They have provided general care as well as eye surgery. They have also been first responders in Gonaïves and other parts of Haiti which have been hard-hit by hurricanes.

Dr. Isaac Cañas from El Salvador said, “I feel proud but a little sad, because what we can do is small compared to the need. It’s our little grain of sand.”

And Dr. Hernan Ortega from Colombia added, “We are a support, but the Haitians need to take the reins. We can’t replace the Haitian state. They have to step up and take the initiative in caring for their people’s health.”

### *Movement of Dominican Women of Haitian Descent (MUDHA)*

The Movement of Dominican Women of Haitian Descent (MUDHA) has organized response teams for some of the worst hit and hardest-to-reach areas of Haiti, to deliver food, water and medical aid. The response is notable because it is organized and supported by Haitians in the diaspora, and because it focuses on human relationships and emotional support as well as physical needs. It does not involve a lot of fundraising, publicity, and marketing, but is based in quiet expressions of human-to-human solidarity.

The first team went into Haiti within 48 hours after the earthquake. They continue to come every 15 days, because each group can only work in the field for two weeks before needing to return to the Dominican Republic to resupply. The latest convoy consisted of psychologists, social workers, doctors and nurses, 50 student volunteers, and Red Cross-Haiti volunteers.

The team designates areas of need and coordinates the logistics of how to organize thousands of people into workable groups to put up tents; distribute basic goods; and provide medical aid. They have delivered to the sites several trucks full of medicine, food, mattresses, tents, portable stoves and water. They have treated hundreds of people with medical needs in Jacmel, Martissant, Carrefour, Leogane, Petit Goave and Grand Goave. They provide emotional and psychological support. Along with counseling, the group organizes soccer, volleyball and domino tournaments. “Reintroducing them to daily activities is paramount after a trauma-inducing experience such as this,” said organizer Sonia Pierre.

Women and children are very vulnerable in these outdoor camps, so MUDHA volunteers provide security. Moreover, they offer surrogate mothering to traumatized children. “We take turns lying down with them, holding them in our arms – keeping them from crying, helping them to fall asleep, ” said organizer Pierre.

MUDHA works with partner organizations such as the New York-based Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees and Socio-Cultural Movement of Haitian Workers in Dominican Republic. “Our response was to get aid down there immediately, because a lot of times these bigger organizations spend more time raising money and tend to cluster in places that are not the

hardest hit," Ninaj Raoul, cofounder and director of Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, said of the latest mission. Other groups in New York City, home of some of the largest populations of Haitians and Dominicans outside of the island, have also converged to offer support to these grassroots initiatives.

(Based on the research and writing of Judith De Los Santos, from "Beyond Port-au-Prince: Grassroots Women's Group Brings Aid to Remote, Hard-Hit Areas of Haiti," *The Independent*, February 19, 2010.)

### *The Lambi Fund of Haiti*

Like so many organizations around the world which raised money for Haiti's earthquake survivors, the Lambi Fund has been inundated with donations from individuals and progressive foundations. Unlike most of those organizations, though, the Lambi Fund's response is premised on reinforcing the strength and autonomy of Haitian community organizations. Based in both the U.S. and Haiti, the Lambi Fund shows how the international community can give urgent assistance in ways that allow the peasant and women's group to strengthen their production or commerce, their advocacy, and their organizations themselves.

Lambi's post-earthquake work continues the same philosophy that it has always held, which is to provide financial resources, training, and technical assistance to peasant-led and/or women-led community organizations, thus strengthening the Haitian people's social and economic power. Its current collaborations build off of long-standing relationships of trust and respect.

Within days after the earthquake, Lambi staff convened regional assemblies of local peasants to define immediate needs and prioritize rebuilding. In response to what people expressed, Lambi's post-catastrophe work is to meet its partner communities' needs for the immediate, while helping them rebuild and expand sustainable rural development and agricultural production for the mid- to long-term.

The urgent aid focuses on giving cash disbursements to 22 grassroots groups in the Artibonite, where an estimated 150,000 internally displaced people have relocated, as well as 17 groups in the South and four more in the Northwest. The money helps the community groups organize themselves; provide clothes, food, medicine, tents, and other essentials; and fortify the local economy.

Mid-term plans include building 880 new latrines in rural areas to prevent the spread of disease. They also include expanding Lambi's women's program to address women's special vulnerability since the catastrophe. Plans also include funding efforts to expand local agriculture, reforest, gain access to water, and increase micro-enterprises, such as collective grain mills and bakeries. Finally, Lambi funding will go to supporting the groups' ability to do advocacy to express their own needs for Haiti's rebuilding.

## V. STRENGTHENING THE 'HUMANITARIAN' IN HUMANITARIAN AID

Haitian grassroots organizations have requested the support of international friends – not just in the short-term, but for years to come. What they want is help insuring the well-being of survivors and guaranteeing that justice and equity be integrated into rebuilding.

What has befallen Haiti is about as bad as it can get; we need to help ensure that the recovery and reconstruction are as good as they can get. We have an excellent opportunity to engage in a different disaster response, for a different future.

At Other Worlds, we believe that aid and recovery should follow the lead of survivors and organizations which represent grassroots sectors. It should be based on careful listening and horizontal solidarity.

To ensure that your aid and engagement helps, not harms, here are a few suggestions:

- 1) Challenge yourself and your colleagues to ensure that you start from principles of dignity, respect, and equity.
- 2) Be sure that any project you may launch or engage in reflects Haitians' agenda. Has a Haitian organization expressed the need, or is it only something that you think they need? If the former, great. If the latter, your instincts or passions may not be aligned with their priorities. Though your heart may be super-sized, the offering may not be helpful. Test it with Haitians who are based in Haiti, as many as you can, before moving forward.
- 3) Promote vehicles for Haitians themselves – especially those whose voices go unheard and needs go unmet – to take the lead. This should be true both in aid and other initiatives you may be involved with, as well as in larger questions of reconstruction.
- 4) Instead of acting as quickly as possible, act with deliberation. Haitians say that anything that happens fast doesn't last.
- 5) Instead of focusing on helping as many people as possible, focus on doing something that will improve the life and deal justly with every Haitian it touches – which might well mean scaling back your initial idea.
- 6) Send money, and send it to people you've carefully checked out with every source you can find. Cash is critical and, in the hand of a trustworthy organization with deep roots in Haiti, will go far in alleviating need. That is, unless you have a way to get in medical aid or tents, or unless you have a direct connection with a group that needs what you have – say, an eye clinic in a shantytown that can put your 300 pairs of glasses to excellent use. Otherwise, please don't send clothes, shoes, or household items. Many of these goods are just feeding a booming sidewalk sale by people desperate for money.

And don't send food. This may seem counter-intuitive given how hungry Haitians are, but peasants are striving to shore up their agricultural production, both to support themselves and to make the nation's food sovereign. Most of the food now being sent is not getting to those in need, anyway.

7) Make sure that your donations are going to support local goods, services, and production. Robert Naiman of Just Foreign Policy comments, "If your aid dollar is used to purchase supplies produced in Haiti, it's doing double duty. And if it's also being used to directly employ Haitians, it's doing triple duty. You want to push your aid dollar as close to the ground as you can."

8) Be careful about assumptions that Haitians need our modernity. We offer the perspective of Evan Hansen, editor of Wired.com, who wrote that "Bad aid starts with ignorance and condescension." He continues: "A glance at [the Lambi Fund's] project list was a wake-up call for me in terms of recognizing my own ignorance and naiveté in tackling big issues of reconstruction in a place I know nothing about first-hand. Perhaps naturally, as the editor of Wired.com, I've been consciously and unconsciously framing the reconstruction in terms of delivering telecom service over mesh networks, bootstrapping data mashups to bring a Web 3.0 layer to the relief, delivering green tech and so on. Sexy. [But] here's what the Lambi Fund wants: Electric grain mills for grinding corn and millet, a portable irrigation pump, ox ploughs, a goat breeding program, a fishing boat and reforestation."<sup>14</sup>

9) Go beyond just giving aid, for that alone will not resolve Haitians' problem. Engage in "people-to-people solidarity," as Camille Chalmers, director of the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA), says - but "not of that solidarity that nation-states use in order to dominate the people. We call on the people to help us in the reconstruction tasks, but also to come out of our social crisis."

Do your part to reform U.S. government policy. Our voices and energy are needed right now to challenge the neo-colonial elements of the U.S. reconstruction plans which are blocking Haitian leadership. Our alliance will continue to be important over the coming years to help Haitian ensure full rights for all; to gain different trade policy that develops, not undermines, labor rights, environmental standards, and food sovereignty; to insure that government policy privileges human need for all over profit for some; and to create space for women's full participation and power.

10) To guide you in your efforts, learn about - and share - the analyses and plans from popular movements, which represent the vast majority. Here are three sources:

- For dozens of our articles about the needs of forgotten survivors and priorities for democratic and just reconstruction - all reflecting the perspectives of the Haitian grassroots - see: <http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/alternatives/another-haiti-possible>

<sup>14</sup> Evan Hansen, "High Tech, Low Tech, Condescension, Understanding," Haiti Rewired, Feb. 2, 2010, <http://haitirewired.wired.com/profiles/blogs/high-tech-low-tech>



- For analysis and recommendations from Haitian civil society and diaspora conferences on the reconstruction, please see:  
[http://www.grassrootsonline.org/sites/grassrootsonline.org/files/Haitian\\_Led\\_Reconstruction\\_and\\_Development\\_-\\_A\\_compilation\\_3-2010.pdf](http://www.grassrootsonline.org/sites/grassrootsonline.org/files/Haitian_Led_Reconstruction_and_Development_-_A_compilation_3-2010.pdf)

- For more Haitian positions (in French only), please see the website of PAPDA:  
<http://www.papda.org/>

What is happening in post-earthquake Haiti has happened in many places before. What can we learn from Haiti in order to improve the quality of the response to the next disaster situation? How can we come out of this 'aid disaster' and instead create more just and appropriate forms of support and giving? How can we begin to listen carefully and engage in honest dialogue with the survivors of catastrophes? How do we establish authentic and respectful forms of solidarity?

We have a wonderful opportunity to carefully ask these questions and start practicing our best responses now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beverly Bell is Coordinator of Other Worlds and Associate Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. Beverly has worked for three decades as an organizer, advocate, and writer in collaboration with social movements in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the U.S. Most of her work has concentrated on Haiti. Her focus areas are just economies; democratic participation; and rights for women, indigenous peoples, and other excluded peoples. Beverly is author of the PEN-New Mexico award-winning *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* and co-author of *Cry Justice, Cry Hope*.

## ABOUT OTHER WORLDS

Other Worlds is a women-driven, multi-media education and movement-building collaborative. We inspire hope and knowledge that other worlds are possible, and help to build them. We compile and publicize political, economic, social, and environmental alternatives that are flourishing throughout the world, and open up new pathways for the public to adapt and integrate them. We also support the movements that are propelling the alternatives, while working with others to spark new efforts for just alternatives. One of our programs is Another Haiti Is Possible. For more information, see [www.otherworldsarepossible.org](http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org).

## ABOUT THE PLATFORM TO ADVOCATE ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN HAITI

The Platform to Advocate Alternative Development in Haiti (PAPDA) is a coalition of nine Haitian organizations which is at the cutting-edge of the economic justice movement. PAPDA works for systemic economic alternatives by educating and mobilizing the grassroots, and by pressuring government and international institutions. Today their focus is on helping social movements engage effectively in rebuilding. For more information, see <http://www.grassrootsonline.org/where-we-work/haiti/haitian-platform-advocate-alternative-development-papda> and [www.papda.org](http://www.papda.org).

## COVER PHOTOS

**Front Cover:** Humanitarian aid, in the style of Haitian community. By Roberto (Bear) Guerra.

**Back Cover:** A meeting of the Women Martyrs of Ayibobo Brave. By Roberto (Bear) Guerra.





# OTHER WORLDS

