

**THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE:
A DISASTER SET APART FROM OTHERS?**

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'Before you can talk about helping Haiti, you (must first talk about) bring(ing) back democracy to Washington' (Schuller 2008: 212)

Introduction

When 300,000 people die from a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, the quantitative data immediately suggests a disaster set apart from other major disasters. One year on, Haiti is still reeling from the effects of its earthquake. The scale of this disaster can also be measured by many other factors: its price tag falls at approximately double the amount of any other earthquake in the last thirty years, with estimates lying between \$7.2 billion and \$8.1 billion in damages and economic loss (Cavallo et al. 2010: 4), whilst aid has hit record amounts standing in 2011 at just over \$3.5 billion (King 2010), though much is yet to be transferred, remaining in 'pledge' form¹. This brief venture into the quantitative data reveals the sheer scale – on so many levels – of Haiti's disaster and encourages us to investigate a little deeper.

Earthquakes are highly energetic events that result from colliding tectonic plates. When countries lie on fault lines, seismic activity is to be expected. Haiti's geographical positioning on two fault lines – the North American and Caribbean – means that earthquakes would not be an uncommon occurrence in the region. It would not be out of place therefore to expect national disaster preparedness plans to be active and operational. In addition, a country's infrastructure should ideally be designed to withstand and mitigate the worst of the effects of the tremors. This was clearly not the case in Haiti, which in many respects collapsed under the magnitude of the 2010 disaster. Natural hazards will always leave death and destruction in their wake – with developing countries commonly 'hit hardest' (Twigg 2001a: 1). However, the Chilean earthquake² that happened only a month later proved that such destruction was not an

¹ For a full list of donors see relief web financial tracking service, that tracks global humanitarian aid flows: http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R24c_C91_Y2010_asof__1104111705.pdf

² Measuring 8.8-magnitude, Reuters tells of tremors that 'battered' the country in an article entitled 'massive earthquake hits Chile, 214 dead' (Reuters, February 27, 2010). The final figure of numbers dead published by the Ministry of Interior in Chile was 525.

inevitable outcome (Schilderman and Lyons 2010: 27). Of course, earthquakes are completely natural events that occur 'irrespective and independently of social action and any modification of the environment' (Wisner et al. 2004: 274). However, a social scientific analysis of natural hazards has come to understand that human actions can have an impact upon the *outcomes* of totally natural phenomena such as earthquakes (Ibid). In keeping with this approach, key elements include assessing the *vulnerability* of a given population or indeed its *resilience* to withstand disasters. Through an examination of the broader and deeper reality in post-earthquake Haiti I suggest that it is necessary to re-examine what is now becoming the standardised disaster management approach, by which I mean the social-scientific approach which sees disasters as socially constructed.

Distinguishing symptoms from causes

Disaster management has undergone a historical shift in emphasis, from searching for answers in the physical hazard itself – looking outwards – to focussing on what turns a hazard into a *disaster* – looking inwards. Coverage of the Haiti earthquake confirms this theoretical shift, with reports focussing less on the trembling ground and more on the haemorrhaging Haitian population, both in terms of recovery, and in terms of mitigation, asking 'what went wrong' and how can we 'build back better' (Schilderman and Lyons 2010). Twigg (1998; 2001a; 2001b; 2004) defines the social scientific turn in natural hazards studies as producing a new, 'alternative' perspective:

'(It) sees disasters as part of the development of societies – as unresolved problems arising from the very processes of development. From this standpoint it becomes clear that there is a link between disasters and the nature of society' (1998:3).

It is from this theoretical starting point that most analyses of the Haiti earthquake begin.

See http://www.interior.gov.cl/filesapp/listado_fallecidos_desaparecidos_27Feb.pdf

Without belittling the human and national tragedy in Chile, commentators concede, however, that the death toll of the Chile earthquake was comparatively low, especially considering it was many times more powerful

An official at the UN described the Haiti disaster as ‘unusual, almost unprecedented’ because of the ‘devastating effect on local capacity of all kinds and the difficulties of the urban, capital city context’ (Holmes 2010:2). By capacity, he is referring to what disaster management often calls ‘resilience’. When looked at in this way, the Haitian population seems to have very little resilience, but why, and is it as ‘unusual’ as our UN representative seems to think? Haiti’s recent history reveals a country riddled with chronic poverty and rapid, ad-hoc urbanisation, a lethal mixture when then accompanied by a natural hazard such as the earthquake in 2010. On the surface, these are obvious explanations for the scale of the disaster that ensued. The absolute poverty of the majority of the population – GDP was put at 2\$ per capita in 2009 – means that it is almost impossible to build any real resilience in the event of such a disaster. Poverty drives people out of the countryside in search of work – 40 percent of the population now live in urban areas, up from 25 percent in 1982 – putting massive pressure on land and causing highly overcrowded conditions, with 306 people living per km² (World Bank 2006). Very low, hand-to-mouth wages, limited space and unclear land tenure (Crawford et al. 2008) means that the housing quality of the majority of residents in Port-au-Prince was poor (El-Masri and Tipple 1997). This explosive cocktail of unsafe conditions (overcrowded urban environment, bad-quality housing, very low incomes) and dynamic pressures (rapid population growth, rapid urbanization) to use Wisner’s formula (Wisner et al. 2004: 51), means that a disaster on this scale was not only waiting to happen, *it was always already happening*, making Holmes’ comment above of Haiti disaster being ‘unusual’ seem, if we are to be at our most critical, naïve. As Winchester states, ‘*everyday conditions* are as much a catastrophe as the occurrence of natural and man-made disasters. For them, life is a daily disaster’ (Winchester 1992: 184). We must however equally be aware of the distinction between ‘symptoms’ of disaster and its ‘causes’ (World Disasters Report 2004:13). A lack of resilience is mentioned as a cause for the disaster. Disaster resilience models therefore focus on reducing vulnerability and strengthening capacity. To what extent does this approach get to the heart of preventing another disaster of this scale?

Haiti: a vulnerable nation?

Highlighting Haiti's vulnerability, as we have done above, we notice that the social causation of disasters concentrates firmly on looking inwards, highlighting the impact of human agency, both of individuals and communities, on the outcome of disasters. This emphasis on 'looking inwards' must be understood within the context of wanting to reject the dominant, 'physical causation' theory of disasters (Quarantelli 1998: 15). Though this move should be welcomed, since it helps explain much more about why disasters happen than simply looking at the hazard itself (Twigg 2001a: 1), an exclusive focus on the microphysics of disasters and the power of individual and collective choices means that the bigger, macro-forces of power that a political economic critique sees, for instance, is overlooked. The current social understanding of disasters therefore does not go far or deep enough, I argue, into understanding how these processes, these unsafe conditions, develop, and why they persist, confusing how one actually comes to be vulnerable or resilient.

Jared Diamond's bestseller *Collapse* is a classic example of his belief that societies 'choose to fail or survive' (Diamond 2005). His central thesis is that, despite European colonialism and American occupation – a fate that many countries have shared – it is Haiti's 'attitudes, self-defined identity, and institutions, as well as their recent leaders of government' (Ibid: 333) that explain why this country has come out comparatively worse than other countries. Though he mentions the brutal history of colonization and of military occupation, he fails to make a clear causal connection between this, and the election of vicious and 'evil' dictators (Ibid: 337) that have dominated Haiti's political landscape in all but exceptional, and brief, moments. Diamond's conclusion is rather that Haiti 'provides the clearest illustration that a society's fate lies in its own hands and depends substantially on its own choices' (Ibid: 341). Diamond is a classic example of a social theorist who looks inwards to explain disasters, who looks at 'vulnerabilities' to describe weakness. Vulnerability, despite having many definitions is commonly described as the 'inability of people, organizations and societies to withstand adverse impacts from multiple stressors to which they are exposed' (Warner 2007: 9) or 'the

characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard' (Wisner et al. 2004: 11). According to these definitions, there is always a choice to make better decisions, to pull out of self-defeating processes; with better planning, better preparedness, more resilience, closer communities, better foundations, more democracy, more economic diversity, disasters can always be averted. Schilderman and Lyons epitomize this view when they say that:

'Safer homes (will) do little to tackle underlying vulnerabilities...What is actually needed is not just to make houses more resilient, but to make Haitians more resilient too...building back a better Haiti involves rebuilding livelihoods, alongside housing' (2010: 27).

Articles such as this assume that Haiti is disaster-prone because of a lack of resilience, or too much vulnerability. I suggest that a closer look however at the root causes of Haiti's 'vulnerability' reveals a country consistently exploited, diverted and divided by forces too strong to resolve, resist, reject or repel. I argue that Haiti is in fact not *vulnerable* – in as much as it was not bad decisions that caused its structural weaknesses, nor a lack of resilience – but that structural and social weaknesses, mistakenly identified as 'vulnerability' have been imposed onto Haiti. Dependency theory suggests that in order to understand development processes in developing countries, it is necessary first and foremost to look first and understand the development processes and politics that make them possible (Roxborough 1979: 42). In this next section, I propose that, rather than looking at vulnerability in Haiti, let us instead look at the systemic and ideological forces at work in Haiti and thus at the external geo-political and political economic reality that has undermined this country for over two centuries. Going right to the heart of the root causes of Haiti's structural and social weakness, I argue, explains more coherently what differentiates Haiti from other disasters and why this has such serious implications for its long-term recovery. In order to do this, we need to adopt a historical lens, and look into its past to make sense of the patterns of destruction.

Not poor but impoverished³

In 1804, Haiti achieved the unthinkable goal of all occupied nations. Inspired by the liberal spirit of the French revolution, Haiti freed itself⁴ from its French colonizers, becoming the first occupied country to gain independence (Dubois 2004; Munro and Walcott-Hackshaw 2008). That a black population was free anywhere in the world was, in a 19th century context, unimaginable. The Northern hemisphere relied heavily on black slavery for its projects of trade and development. This ‘outrageous’ rebellion, it was feared, might encourage similar revolutions across the colonized world, something that could not be tolerated by the imperial forces. Rather than re-claim the land, which the French had already heavily degraded (Diamond 2005: 334; Chomsky 2010), the French imposed a fine on Haiti, believing that they were owed a recompense from the Haitians for unlawfully withdrawing their labour.⁵ Lawson sees this as a primary explanation why Haiti is not poor, but impoverished: ‘Impoverished places are not necessarily lagging, but rather they are simultaneously produced by market forces of integration and agglomeration that concentrate wealth and growth in other places’ (Lawson 2010: 355). In 1825, French war ships returned to Haiti and demanded, on pains of being thrown back into enslavement, the sum of 150 million gold francs (equal to \$21 billion today), which took them 122 years to pay back, making the final installment in 1947 (Benoit 1978: 80; Chomsky 2010). This debt, which France openly refused to re-pay despite a formal request in 2004 by former president Jean-Bertrand

³ On the 5th March 2011 I attended a workshop entitled ‘Why are poor countries poor’ led by Ricardo Navarro which took place at the event *6 Billion Ways* in London. In his opening address he spoke about the difference between ‘poor countries’ and ‘impoverished countries’. Poor countries are considered as being ‘ok in the long run, just a bit down and out’ whereas impoverished countries are countries that have had poverty enforced on them. This is a distinction I sympathise with, hence my using it here. For more information see: <http://6billionways.org.uk/2011/03/why-are-poor-countries-poor-2/>

⁴ Though not before a bloody battle with the occupying forces that lasted twelve years.

⁵ The exact wording of Charles X’s ordinance – King of France between 1824 and 1830 – is as follows: ‘Les habitants...de Saint-Domingue verseront (à la) France...la somme de cent cinquante millions de francs, destinée à dédommager les anciens colons qui réclament une indemnité...Nous concédons, à ces conditions, par la présente ordonnance, aux habitants de la partie française de Saint-Domingue, l’indépendance pleine et entière de leur gouvernement.’ My own translation: The current residents of St Domingue (Haiti) must make a yearly financial contribution to France to the sum of 150 million francs, as a compensation to its former colonizers who demand an indemnity. If these conditions are met, France will grant complete independence to the government of the French part of Haiti.

Aristide, is easily linked with Haiti's physical vulnerability, and begins to show the root causes of Haiti's inadequate preparedness in the face of the 2010 earthquake, explaining why Haiti's resilience was non-existent, eroded away:

'Haiti's weak infrastructure turns challenges into disasters and disasters into fully-fledged catastrophes. The earthquake is a prime example. And this is where all those illegal debt payments may yet extract their most devastating cost. Each payment to a foreign creditor was money not spent on a road, a school, an electrical line' (Klein 2010).

This debt is only the beginning of a relentless relationship with sovereign imperial powers that was to continue to undermine Haiti economically and politically. For the past 200 years, Haiti's contact with domineering powers – particularly the USA – is characterized by trade embargoes⁶, re-occupations⁷ and later enforced re-structuring, privatisation and liberalisation in order to qualify for strings-attached aid at its worst (Chomsky 2010). In a series of interviews in 2004, Schuller captured the following statement, revealing important insights into how 'aid' is seen in Haiti: 'the donor, when he gives you some money, he does not give it in the function of your priorities that you defined. He gives the money in the function of his vision, his perceptions' (Schuller 2008: 210). Forced to privatize its public utilities, forced to accept subsidized imported food that eventually destroyed Haitian agriculture, forced to accept US-written legislation – ironically termed HERO⁸ and later HOPE – that extended free trade privileges of tax exemption to owners of textile processing factories, Haiti's sovereignty has been systematically undermined, exploiting a weakened country with a swathe of neo-liberal measures (Schuller 2008). Indeed, Haiti is different to other major disasters

⁶ There have been two major trade embargoes imposed on Haiti. The first was imposed by the USA, who did not recognize Haiti as a free state in 1805. The second was imposed by the World Trade Organisation in order to suffocate Haiti's brutal military regime, a regime that was proven to be appointed by the USA itself as part of a manoeuvre to topple its left-wing president years earlier. The recent batch of wikileaks releases have been pounced on by journalists who claim they have found evidence to prove that Aristide was toppled in 2004 by a US-backed military coup. For more information see 'Wikileaks lesson on Haiti' published in the Guardian on 17 December 2010 by Mark Weisbrot, an active commentator on Haiti (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/dec/17/haiti-wikileaks>) and

⁷ Notably from 1915-1934 implemented by Woodrow Wilson.

⁸ 'Haiti Economic Recovery Opportunity'

not because the scale of the disaster was incomparable with any other in recent history, nor because it was so vulnerable, but because it was not vulnerable in the first place, rather a victim of a much more powerful system that dictated its weakness. This is the *disaster before the disaster, the story behind the story*.

Though we have spoken much of the United States and France, it is important that we do not repeat the same mistakes that we were earlier criticizing of the standard social scientific approach that narrowly looks 'inwards' for social causality. Rather than pointing the finger at a few countries, we must look outwards and see that this behaviour is part of a wider ideology and structure, that of neo-liberal capitalism that has consistently ensured Haiti's weakness in order that it can continue to provide services and economic opportunities for outside forces, mainly the United States. 'Accumulation through dispossession is a necessary condition for capitalism's survival... Uneven geographical development through dispossession, it follows, is a corollary of capitalist stability.' (Harvey 2006b: 91) This is precisely what Harvey, Jessop, Smith and many other Marxist geographers refer to as a 'spatial fix' which is a geographical expansion that serves to manage, at least for some time, crisis-tendencies inherent in accumulation' (Jessop 2006: 146). Capital moves to where the rate of profit is highest and to where labour and resources are cheap (Roxborough 1979: 55; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2005: 119; Harvey 2006a; Harvey 2006b; Smith 2008: 187; Jessop 2006: 146; Pelling 2003: 9), hence its involvement in Haiti. I am firmly arguing here that a full understanding of disasters is impossible without taking political economy into account (O'Keefe et al. 1976). It is not an 'act of God' (Wisner 2003:45), nor is it the act of 'Man' or even 'endemic within societies (Winchester 1992: 184), but rather a process of development that demands profit and relies on free-trade and privatisation, of which not only the by-product but the desired result are failed, weakened, 'vulnerable' states such as Haiti (Kanbur and Venables 2005: 9; Gilbert 2007: 433; Griffin 1978: 37).

Conclusion: Implications for long-term recovery

Different theories of disaster management reflect prevailing views on the causes, characteristics and consequences of disasters. A 'risk-reduction' approach, that sees the physical hazard as the main causal factor for disasters might try to build better physical defenses, better building foundations. A social vulnerability approach, that sees the choices and dynamics of individuals and communities to be the exacerbating factor, would make better plans, create a more diverse economy, empower communities to work together and improve communications. Whilst neither of these approaches are wrong, by looking *either* inwards *or* outwards, they do not 'see' that both perspectives are needed. This double movement allows us to analyse the structural and ideological causation of disasters that lie in historical, social and economic processes and relationships. This however poses a problem for practical action: how would a country centre a disaster management plan to prepare, respond to and mitigate the dangerous effects of harmful neo-liberal ideology without sounding absurd? As a first step, it is essential, of course, that we take time to understand these processes, as O'Keefe et al. suggested over thirty years ago: '(we must) understand the process by which countries are marginalized to tackle vulnerability...(to) alleviate the causes and not merely the symptoms of disaster' (O'Keefe et al. 1976). Understanding this process is important, but how do we act on it?

Stable and sustainable long-term disaster recovery will need strong leadership from a central government that rejects its history of corruption and focuses not only on immediate recovery, but on a strong Haitian economy that acts in Haitian, not external, interests. Hours after the earthquake hit, the right-wing think-tank *The Heritage Foundation* issued a statement saying 'the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti's long-dysfunctional government and economy'⁹. The structural underpinnings of Haiti's urban poverty – a main exacerbating factor for the Haiti 2010 disaster – are due to the destruction of national production and public services, enforced in part by the International Monetary Fund's

⁹ For a full reference see <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/01/13/things-to-remember-while-helping-haiti/>

(IMF) devastating Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt initiative that enforced rigorous structural adjustment programmes to privatize national companies and services (Chomsky 2010). Recovery will only come when western powers stop veering economic opportunities in their interest and allow the people of Haiti to have a say in their future, unimpeded by the influence of imperial superpowers. It is well-known that aid always comes at a price – which makes the Bush-Clinton donor-duo appointed by Obama immediately after the earthquake to help raise funds for Haiti seem all the more suspicious. A brief trawl through their website reveals their neo-colonialist motives, thinly, if at all, layered in vague language of economic ‘opportunity’ for Haiti:

‘In order to spur economic growth...and *put Haitians back to work*, it is critical to establish a climate in which businesses can operate and expand...above all let’s send in business investors to create jobs. Otherwise, there will always be more needs, more crises, more tragedies, more victims’.¹⁰ (My own emphasis)

We are not challenging economic growth – badly needed in a country such as Haiti, nor the need for jobs. But this must be led by Haiti as a sovereign nation, or else economic growth will only continue to produce the uneven development that sets Haiti aside from the rest of its hemisphere (See Annex 1) (Griffin 1978: 23). A new President, Michel Martelly was elected on the 5 April 2011 (The Guardian 5/4/2011). Many would agree that he has a monumental task ahead of him. He must know that if he is to attempt to build resilience and reduce vulnerability, this can only be done if structural problems are first addressed.

¹⁰ For a full reference, see <http://www.clintonbushhaitifund.org>.

Annex 1

Correspondence from a colleague who lives and works in Haiti. She works for the NGO *Entrepreneurs du Monde* and I find her vision very striking, one that I think gives a good indication on what we have been advocating for long term recovery, notably a sovereign economy. The following text is a translation from the French:

"I think you could say the Haitian economy is the most liberal on earth, because there is no import duty. Rice, stoves and many other sorts of products are even subsidized by the state, which by the way doesn't do much public spending: nothing is spent on health or on education.

You ask who is profiting from this crime? It is the Dominicans and the Americans. The seven largest rice producers in the United States are supplying all of the rice. This cheap rice is flooding the Haitian market and being sold at a price that the Haitians just can't compete with because Haitian farmers face many problems, such as limited access to energy, security, housing, finance...In my mind, this situation is a real disaster and does not seem to be getting better. A large part of my work is to support local production. I think this is vital for Haiti: we need to be producing and consuming Haitian goods. Today, when I go to the Supermarket, I can't buy any Haitian goods, everything is imported and everything is expensive. These past few months, with the rise in the price of petrol, the price of food goods has risen again, and a food crisis is on the horizon. In this situation the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) at the UN will again subsidise the rice, which will again make every other country apart from Haiti rich. It's a vicious circle.

It is this tension between the immediate urgency that feeds the long-term problems: the two walk awkwardly together. By this I mean that the policies put in place to mitigate short term crises such as food distribution programmes, and cash for work/ cash for food programmes sometimes have a disastrous long term economic effect."

Hélène Mauduit, Entrepreneurs du Monde
Chargée du développement Nouveaux Produits/Nouvelles filières
Correspondence by email 21 April 2011.

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