

PROGRESSIO



Haiti after the earthquake

Civil society perspectives on Haitian reconstruction
and Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations

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Registered in the UK as a charity (number 294329) and a company limited by guarantee (number 2002500)

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© Progressio December 2010

ISBN 978-1-85287-336-3

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Cover photo: Wilbert Joseph outside his house which was completely destroyed in the earthquake. Port-au-Prince, June 2010. Photo © Natasha Fillion/Progressio

Acknowledgements

Progressio would like to acknowledge the contribution of our partners in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, who gave their valuable time despite the pressing and difficult context in Haiti, and shared their views frankly and openly. This report is a credit to their hard work and resilience.

We would also like to thank our Hispaniola office for putting together an effective programme of visits and facilitating all the meetings. Their close relationship with partners made it possible for us to gather the views on which this report is based.

We are grateful to our Hispaniola volunteer, Shaheen Saib, whose invaluable support made it possible to produce this report within a short timescale.

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Fr François Kawas, Director, Cedar (Centre for Social Research), Haiti

“These international organisations should talk to us and learn about what we need. They will save a lot of money by doing that. Development should be led by grassroots organisations supported by the international community, not the other way round.”

A displaced person living in Belladere, Haiti

“If the reconstruction process is carried out in the same exclusionary manner, and without consensus and respect, we will not be eliminating poverty in Haiti. On the contrary, we will be building more fragmentation and divisions in a process that requires building consensus.”

Colette Lespinasse, Groupe d’Appui aux Rapatriés & Réfugiés (GARR), Haiti

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Foreword

On 12 January 2010, Haiti experienced one of the hardest challenges yet in what has been a tumultuous history. An earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale devastated the capital Port-au-Prince and the surrounding region. Killing at least 230,000 people, and with a reconstruction bill of US\$11.5 billion, it is one of the worst natural disasters of recent years. Already the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, Haiti has regularly suffered from political violence and has nearly four out of five of its people living on less than US\$2 a day.¹ The challenges of getting back to the situation before the earthquake, let alone for further reconstruction and long-term development, are considerable.

Yet there is so far an untold story. Alongside the massive international aid effort and the global media focus, within hours of the earthquake, civil society organisations (CSOs) in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, including many Progressio partners, were mobilising to help. The key role they played among the earthquake responses is less well known. However, the role of Haitian civil society will continue to be vital in the months and years ahead. Indeed, Haiti cannot move towards recovery and reconstruction in any other way.

This report looks at the experiences, thoughts and expectations of civil society in the region over the past year. We seek to share a snapshot of opinions from Haitian and Dominican Republic CSOs as reported to us in the middle of 2010. Unsurprisingly, the views shared vary at times, but there is consensus on a number of themes – and particularly about the importance of effective engagement of CSOs by those working to rebuild Haiti, and the challenges of achieving this.

In going deeper, to talk to people who are leaders, organisers and activists in the region, we get a glimpse of the frustrations and hopes for the future. We hear the analysis and strength of the people who are so vital to building up Haiti. I believe this report makes a valuable contribution towards a better understanding and appreciation of how, in practice, civil society has a key role to play in Haiti's future – a vision of a new future for which we hope Haiti can swiftly build up its strength.

Christine Allen

Progressio Executive Director

1 Introduction

Before the earthquake that struck the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince and its surrounding areas on 12 January 2010, Haiti was already considered to be a fragile and impoverished state. 78% of Haiti's 10 million people lived on less than US\$2 a day,² infant mortality was among the highest in the western hemisphere, and life expectancy reached only 60 years.³ Unemployment stood at 60%,⁴ contributing to a serious loss of skills and human resources through widespread migration to the US and other countries including the Dominican Republic.⁵

The earthquake left at least 230,000 people dead⁶ and much of the country in ruins. In addition to the physical devastation, state services were badly hit. An estimated 16,000 Haitian civil servants died in the disaster.⁷ Many of the official government buildings were destroyed. In the aftermath of the earthquake, civil society organisations from both Haiti and the Dominican Republic joined in solidarity to play a key role in providing and caring for the survivors and beginning the process of long-term reconstruction.

Six months after the earthquake, Progressio asked a range of Haitian and Dominican civil society organisations their views and perspectives on the relief and reconstruction process. This report gathers some of those views and presents some key findings.

Progressio believes it is important that lessons are learned from the experiences of civil society organisations so far, in order to ensure the full engagement of civil society in the long-term reconstruction and development of Haiti. This is also a key opportunity to review recent improvements in Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations with a view to strengthening them for the future.

It is hoped that this report will be of interest to international development agencies, donors, civil society organisations (CSOs),⁸ non-governmental organisations (NGOs),⁹ and governments responding to the emergency and engaging in the reconstruction efforts in Haiti. Progressio believes that this is an opportunity to take a holistic approach to the long-term development of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

With the eyes of the international community already moving away from Haiti, we need to make sure that the ongoing needs of the Haitian people are kept firmly on the agenda of policy makers, donors and international NGOs.

Methodology

This report is the result of a range of activities undertaken by Progressio's Policy and Advocacy Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean, Progressio development workers, and representatives from Progressio partner organisations. These included field visits, a 'six months on' review questionnaire, one-to-one interviews, and community meetings. Around 25 Haitian and Dominican organisations participated, including human rights, grassroots, environmental, faith-based and generalist organisations. All these organisations were involved – either directly or indirectly – in providing humanitarian relief in Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Scope

Due to the enormity of the development challenges in Haiti, Progressio decided to focus on the following topics: the reconstruction process, Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations, and the future of Haiti and the challenges ahead.

The report shows that Haitian and Dominican civil society organisations have a strong commitment to continuing to work for the reconstruction of Haiti, but have serious reservations about the current process. While this report does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of aid

effectiveness, it highlights flaws in the process that have already created barriers to effective progress towards reconstruction. It will be important to overcome these barriers so that the situation may be improved in the near future.

The report also brings new insights into how CSOs perceive Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations. The spontaneous solidarity and support among Dominicans for their Haitian neighbours following the earthquake could lead to a new era in Dominican-Haitian relations and provide an opportunity to develop the island as a whole. However, it is obvious that there are further complexities that need to be addressed, and CSOs have constructive and helpful reflections on how the international community can best support both countries in their future challenges.

We acknowledge that there are many pressing issues that it has not been possible to tackle in this report – such as the long-term impact of internal displacement on the social fabric, and the positive role of the Haitian diaspora in responding to the disaster. However, while it was not part of the prepared list of questions, an important issue highlighted by many CSOs and individuals alike during interviews related to the conditions in the camps, especially with regards to the vulnerability of women and children. There were continuous reports of violence against women and girls, and improvements to their safety and security was a priority issue for many.

2 The role of Haitian civil society organisations

Challenges faced by CSOs

Before the earthquake, Haitian CSOs strived to help meet the basic needs of the Haitian community through social programmes, filling the gap left by the inefficiencies and corruption of the state.¹⁰ However, their role was frequently reactive rather than proactive and preventative, and – like the state itself¹¹ – they were unprepared for the disaster that struck on 12 January 2010.

All Haitian CSOs interviewed felt ‘between a rock and a hard place’. Many of those interviewed expressed a complete lack of trust and confidence in their own government, and felt it was their duty to respond to the crisis. They felt overwhelmed by the desire to help meet people’s immediate needs, while at the same time trying to cope with their everyday responsibilities. One organisation, working with undocumented people, said that they continued to run training sessions for people on how to acquire documentation, while looking after dozens of displaced Haitian people living in their office backyard.

The stresses of this situation have led to a lot of polarisation and fragmentation among CSOs. Indeed, the pressures of the situation led some of those interviewed for this report to ask to remain anonymous, and the interviews reveal differences and divisions on the best way forward. For example, some Haitian CSOs feared that the confrontational attitudes shown by certain Haitian organisations towards the Haitian government and/or the international community may harm rather than benefit their input and participation in the reconstruction process, contribute to isolating the voices of Haitian CSOs, and ultimately lessen their impact.

Relations between CSOs and the Haitian state

“We feel excluded. We think the government should have initiated a broad consultation about the refoundation of the country. This is not just a matter for the government but for the whole nation – and every Haitian citizen – but the leadership is just not interested.”

Fr François Kawas, Director, Cedar (Centre for Social Research), Port-au-Prince. Interview by Jo Barrett, June 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Some Haitian CSOs stated that in the last two years, despite the harsh poverty in Haiti, the country had experienced some small progress in terms of social and political stability. The appointment in August 2008 of Ms Michèle Pierre-Louis¹² (the director of a Haitian CSO) as Prime Minister of Haiti was seen, by some of the Haitian CSOs interviewed, as a step forward in including the wider Haitian civil society in government instead of perpetuating the interests of the same Haitian elite. However, her term of office was short-lived, as she was ousted in October 2009, after just over one year, by the Haitian senate.

There is a huge lack of trust between civil society organisations and the state due to the historical tradition of exclusion and oppression customary in Haiti. In the years leading up to the earthquake, social structures in Haiti have tended to marginalise much of the population, with the roots of this in years of poor governance and state repression that affected deeply the relationship between the state and the wider civil society. Some Haitian intellectuals argue that Haiti lives under a ‘culture of exclusion’ which systematically denies the vast majority of Haiti’s people access to power or wealth. In order to ‘build back better’, Haiti needs to tackle these embedded exclusionary practices and develop a culture of integration.

According to some CSOs interviewed, in its failure to respond effectively to the earthquake the Haitian government lost a golden opportunity to mobilise and unite the Haitian people for a common good. The government's inability to release a statement until 12 hours after the earthquake, for example, was cited in interviews as undermining the faith that people might have had in the government's capacity to cater for their needs.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, a perceived lack of consultation with Haitian CSOs by the Haitian government fed a sense of marginalisation within an important sector of the social fabric, which is also in a position to influence ownership behind the reconstruction process. An unhelpful disempowering effect was experienced, especially among those who already felt marginalised such as women and the internally displaced.

At the time of the interviews, there was strong opposition among some CSOs to engagement in the reconstruction process, and there is a risk that the current conditions could mean a continued deepening of this marginalisation.

"Although we also need to be realistic, it is important to recognise that social transformation in Haiti is very difficult, due to the attitude of an elite that has benefited for the last 200 hundred years from the poverty and illiteracy prevailing in the country.

"I'm fully convinced that a prime opportunity to call for national unity was lost in the first few hours after the earthquake. Aside from the shock created by the devastation, during the first three weeks after the earthquake there were things that the Haitian government could have done to appease the population, which might have developed some trust and a new dialogue going forward. The local and national bourgeoisie have a narrow-minded vision of the country that does not take into consideration the national interests.

"It does not mean that things cannot get better, but there have been very few coherent responses which call for a new social contract/dialogue between the Haitian state and its civil society. And that also goes for certain Haitian civil society actors."

Quote from a member of a Haitian CSO who wished to remain anonymous. Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Relations with the international community

We asked the organisations about what the international community and international NGOs should do to support them. Some responded that it was difficult in the post-earthquake circumstances for Haitian CSOs to fulfil administrative and accounting duties – for example, reporting for small amounts of short-term funding, or meeting reporting deadlines. More flexibility from donors on reporting was requested.

Concerns were expressed at the length of time between the submission of a project proposal and the actual approval, which in some cases reached almost four months. Consequently, many approved projects did not respond to the immediate need because, by the time a reply to the project proposal was received, other NGOs had intervened or the situation had simply changed priority.

“These international organisations should talk to us and learn about what we need. They will save a lot of money by doing that. Development should be led by grassroots organisations supported by the international community, not the other way round.”

A displaced person living in Belladere, Haiti. Extract from a meeting organised by Progressio with community members, May 2010.

Another challenge was the language used at UN cluster meetings.¹³ For a long time these meetings were conducted in English or Spanish, not in French or Creole, which contributed to excluding Haitian CSOs from the process. Haitian civil society also felt that not enough efforts were being made by the UN to engage with local CSOs in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. It was suggested that better partnership between the UN and international NGOs with an established local presence might have helped to resolve language barriers, and would have been more likely to facilitate links with local organisations.

It was seen as important that all stakeholders involved in Haiti and working alongside CSOs understand that these CSOs have a huge workload to deal with. They expressly requested that international organisations, including the UN, international NGOs and multi-lateral institutions, share their information and analysis more effectively among each other in order to avoid overburdening Haitian organisations with requests for information and other related paper work. The CSOs would rather see more action on the ground, and initiatives that support them.

“The massive influx of NGOs that arrived in Haiti shortly after the earthquake turned out to be a problem rather than a help because the coordination became more difficult and complex. Also, there is a big difference between the approach of those organisations that have been working in Haiti for a long time, who know community networks and their leaders, and those that just arrived. Most of the ‘new organisations’ spent a lot of money in feasibility studies rather than in concrete actions. Even if they decided to help, they should have shared the information from the feasibility studies they collected among each other, to save time, efforts and money.”

A settler living in Lascahobas, Central Plateau, Haiti. Extract from a meeting organised by Progressio with community members, May 2010.

“The international community should support Haiti in the reconstruction process, but with the clusters, they are deciding for, not with, Haitians. We should rather apply the approach encapsulated in the phrase: ‘give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for life’. In this way, you will make development more sustainable and people will feel part of it.”

Fr Lazard Wismith, Director of the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service (SJRM). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Many Haitian CSOs interviewed felt angry and frustrated at what they perceived as marginalisation by the international community. They felt that they had become passive observers rather than active participants in the reconstruction process. Language and logistical barriers influenced this perception of being excluded – for example, most of the meetings were taking place at the UN building compound, which made it complicated and intimidating for Haitians to enter without proper documentation and passes.

These comments reflect a commonly experienced challenge in emergency situations – to include and ensure ownership of relief, recovery and reconstruction processes among civil society organisations, while establishing processes for coordination which are manageable for CSOs to engage with. This perception was reflected throughout the interviews conducted for this report.

3 The reconstruction process

“We do not want to see foreigners leading the reconstruction process. We want to see the Haitian government assuming this challenge supported by its civil society, and backed by the international community. But if they don’t listen to us how can we participate and engage constructively? We call for real time and real effort given to develop dialogue in order to build genuine inclusion. Processes like Popular Assemblies should be sought after.”

Colette Lespinasse, Groupe d’Appui aux Rapatriés & Réfugiés (GARR – Support Group for Refugees and Returnees). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Lack of CSO involvement in the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment and the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission

The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) was carried out in March 2010 by “a joint team composed of representatives of the [Haitian] Government and members of the International Community”. It consists of “(i) a multi-sector review of damage and losses incurred following the earthquake on January 12, 2010 and an estimation of the impact of the earthquake on each themed sector; (ii) an action plan for the identification of needs for recovery and rebuilding the country in the very short term (6 months), short term (18 months), medium term (3 years) and long term (10 years).”¹⁴

The Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) was established in April 2010 for a period of 18 months.¹⁵ The Commission is comprised of voting and non-voting members, almost all of whom are Haitian officials or members of the international community. One of the non-voting members is “One representative designated by the community of national NGOs”.¹⁶ The IHRC is co-chaired by the Haitian Prime Minister Jean Max Bellerive and former US President Bill Clinton. The IHRC’s mandate is to review and approve all projects proposed by Haitian government ministries, donors or implementing agencies to ensure their alignment with Haitian national priorities.¹⁷

These two processes, namely the PDNA and IHRC, are running in parallel with each other.

Haitian CSOs were asked if their organisation had been consulted in the drafting of the PDNA or had been contacted by members of the IHRC, either directly or indirectly; and what their views were about their engagement with the reconstruction process through their local or national authorities, or any other medium.

Haitian organisations expressed strong views about how the PDNA was carried out, especially because they felt that there was no involvement of the wider civil society in the process. Most of the organisations interviewed felt left out from the review and consultation process, and therefore have become increasingly suspicious of who the PDNA action plan is really going to benefit. Many Haitian CSOs said that they were fighting for their voices to be heard by those leading the reconstruction process. This point is very important since it could mean ‘make or break’ for a new beginning in Haiti.

Many Haitian CSOs felt that it was wrong for the Haitian government to endorse the PDNA action plan because, in their view, it was not rooted in the needs of the population but written by technocrats.¹⁸ They felt that the Haitian government now wants validation of this plan but CSOs were excluded from its formulation and drafting, which marginalised their opinion from the start.

Haitian CSOs were asked to what extent their organisation has been able to participate in ‘any’ consultation regarding the composition of the IHRC. Their perception was that this Commission was set up in negotiations between donors, the Haitian government and the Haitian business sector without any involvement from grassroots or local CSOs. Some felt that because the IHRC has a supranational mandate, its role might be unconstitutional.

Haitian CSOs strongly questioned the reasons behind the lack of voting rights for national NGOs, especially since the business community and Labour Union have voting members. They were also unclear about the Commission’s mandate and how to influence its decisions. On this matter, it is important to note that Haitian CSOs are divided on whether or not to engage with the Commission. Haitian CSOs that were in favour of participating in the process said that it was better to do so than to risk being left out altogether, but others did not wish to affirm the process by engaging with it.

The Haitian CSOs we interviewed believed that, for the reconstruction process to succeed, Haitian people should be involved in shaping their future through the adoption of new democratic, inclusive and transparent methods. However, at the time of the fieldwork, there was, as discussed, a significant expressed opposition among some CSOs to ‘engagement’ in the reconstruction process, making it more difficult to create ownership. The lack of CSO involvement in the PDNA and the IHRC illustrates the complexities of delivering a development plan (reconstruction plan) in an emergency/humanitarian context. The PDNA was completed in a matter of weeks, in a context where longer-term development considerations conflicted with shorter-term humanitarian objectives. Setting a longer timetable for reconstruction planning could have ensured a greater sense of ownership of the process among CSOs in a country plagued with examples of exclusion, but the pressure to address emergency needs meant that the process moved more quickly. This may have harmed relationships between the Haitian state, other reconstruction agencies and civil society, which could have a lasting impact.

“The PDNA was written by external experts without consultation with Haitian CSOs. To our surprise, this plan was then presented in the Haitian media as the new ‘reconstruction plan’. This sort of approach has created a lot of rejection and ‘bad’ feelings among Haitian CSOs, because it clearly excludes us from a process that is legitimately ours. With this attitude, the Haitian government demonstrates that they never wanted our input, but they would still need our support for the implementation of the plan. If the reconstruction process is carried out in the same exclusionary manner, and without consensus and respect, we will not be eliminating poverty in Haiti. On the contrary, we will be building more fragmentation and divisions in a process that requires building consensus.”

Colette Lespinasse, Groupe d’Appui aux Rapatriés & Réfugiés (GARR). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Haitian state leadership

“Haiti is a country that was already in crisis before the earthquake. It is clear that the weak and exclusionary structure of Haitian society has not responded to the needs of the majority of the population, and now, there are not leaders in charge of this challenging reconstruction process. After the earthquake, Haitians were very hopeful that change was imminent, but without proper leaders, this failed. People became very disappointed in the lack of direction, and the lack of consultation with CSOs in the reconstruction process has not helped at all.”

Fr Lazard Wismith, Director of the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service (SJRM). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

Some Haitian CSOs questioned their exclusion from the reconstruction process and the lack of clarity around CSO participation in the Interim Commission. These CSOs saw it as a responsibility of the Haitian government to lead these two processes as well as facilitate responses to concerns raised by CSOs on these two fronts. Some Haitian CSOs interviewed perceived this lack of clarity as a tactic by the government to avoid being more inclusive in its consultation with the wider civil society. They expressed the (unconfirmed) view that government officials were yet to be seen in the camps. The Haitian government was also perceived by some CSOs as leaving key decisions to the IHRC.

Some CSOs found it alarming that the Haitian government had not hosted any reconstruction meetings in Haiti, and asked how it is possible for donors and other contributors to see the Haitian reality for themselves when meetings are held overseas. There have been four Haitian summits so far – two in the Dominican Republic, one in Canada and one in the USA – plus the International Conference of World Cities and Regions for Haiti in Martinique. Although most of the summits have had NGO participation, there was no official NGO presence at the June 2010 World Summit for the Future of Haiti, held at Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic, at which former US President Bill Clinton announced that the IHRC was fully set up and its members appointed.

Haitian CSOs argued that they should be supported in developing ‘observatories’¹⁹ to ensure that the funds given by the international community really do result in the implementation of high-quality and relevant programmes. They felt that programmes should be open to tender and that clear monitoring of funds is paramount to reduce corruption and duplication of efforts.

Haitian elections and democracy

On 10 September 2010, the Organisation of American States (OAS) announced that they would be working together with the National Identification Office (ONI) of Haiti and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to launch a National Registration Campaign to offer identification services to many Haitian citizens in preparation for the presidential elections scheduled for 28 November 2010.

Before the earthquake, lack of documentation was a serious problem in Haiti. In 2009, the OAS started funding a documentation programme in Haiti. However, with the earthquake, archives have been almost completely destroyed. Among the CSOs interviewed, the Central Electoral Council (CEC) has dubious credibility. They felt that, given the current situation in the country, the CEC would need international assistance to achieve minimal standards of electoral respectability, and this support would need to be provided in a short space of time.

Haitian CSOs were concerned at the time of the interviews that the context in Haiti was unlikely to produce fair or transparent elections due to the enormity of the documentation problem, the perceived lack of commitment among political parties to transparency in the electoral process, weaknesses in the electoral system itself, and logistical problems – for example, the levels of devastation of Port-au-Prince are such that the government would need to rethink where and how to organise the polling stations.

However, they also recognised the paradox that if the electoral calendar is not respected it may have long-term damaging effects for democracy in Haiti, and that without this election – and therefore without a legitimate elected government – funds for reconstruction may not be released.

“There was no political consensus to call for elections. In addition, no actions were taken to update the electoral census and the death registry. After the earthquake we have a population that have changed addresses, and that have no documents. With all these irregularities, it is very possible that electoral fraud may happen in the process.”

Colette Lespinasse, Groupe d’Appui aux Rapatriés & Réfugiés (GARR). Interview by the Bonó Communication Unit, June 2010.

Land tenure and reconstruction

Before the earthquake, Haiti had neither reliable data on land tenancy nor a systematic regulatory system for land tenure. Factors in this situation include the complex forms of land tenancy, increasing fragmentation of peasant lands, variety in the size and number of plots, the location and topography of the parcels, concentration of land ownership and increasing competition for land.²⁰

Haitian CSOs were clear that without appropriate land reform, the issue of land tenure will seriously hamper reconstruction efforts, for example where houses will be built, which land can be used, and how much compensation should be paid. Much of the land most suitable for housing construction is in the hands of private owners. If no agreement is reached on land transfer, houses might have to be built on less suitable land, leading to additional costs for adequate drainage, flood prevention, etc. However, at the time of the interviews, the Haitian government was yet to produce a comprehensive plan for land reform and land allocation that will enable sustainable planning to meet the needs of the population. The PDNA action plan only mentions that “it is the role of the urban plan to govern the allocation of land between that which will be used by the State and that which will be transferred to private landowners at current value of land”.²¹ It does not establish how this will be implemented or the timeline for this.

Some Haitian CSOs expressed their concerns about meeting the need to both provide short-term shelter and ensure the investment needed for building more long-term housing. At the time of the interviews, Haiti (and the whole of the Caribbean region) was approaching the hurricane season and the priority for temporary housing was high. However, sustainable housing is also a key long-term development need.²²

On the logistical side, many CSOs at the time of the interviews were providing emergency shelter on their premises for displaced people. More land availability for camp relocation was required in Port-au-Prince in order to free up office space for the CSOs’ everyday operations.

4 Decentralisation – a key way forward

“If we invest in local development, municipalities can become strong actors for local and trans-border development. We need to increase the visibility and potential of local leadership and the role of women at local level. Up to now, all the assets – financial or human – leave for Cap Haitien and Port-au-Prince. This is bad for communities who are left with nothing.”

A woman settler living in Lascahobas, Central Plateau, Haiti. Extract from a meeting organised by Progressio with community members, May 2010.

The negative impact of centralisation on aid delivery

“The aid continues to be centralised in the capital, which creates a lot of problems for communities outside of Port-au-Prince. The tension between communities is growing because help has not reached them despite hearing in the media that vast amounts of money have been promised to Haiti. It is not clear who is monitoring international aid, which may affect transparency and accountability.”

Quote from a member of a Haitian CSO who wished to remain anonymous. Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

The Haitian CSOs interviewed stated that centralisation affects all aspects of everyday life in Haiti. Haitians are used to travelling to the capital to access government services, from provision of ID cards, passport and birth certificates through to payment of local government salaries. This was seen as placing unreasonable demands on people living outside Port-au-Prince and overburdening the system itself. The capital, Port-au-Prince, was seen as the only place where authority and power is located, and where decision making remains in the hands of an elite.

Some reports have indicated that aid delivery was centralised following the earthquake in order to control distribution from the capital. Although this may seem to be a logical response to the need to account for all aid, inefficiencies resulted, with reports of lorries carrying perishables travelling all the way to Port-au-Prince from the border with the Dominican Republic, only to be then sent back to locations near the southern border.

Some CSOs felt that, to some extent, international organisations (reportedly around 900 have been involved in the relief effort) have contributed to what they perceived as ‘chaos’. Many of these criticisms were directed at international organisations operating in the country that were perceived as not coordinating among each other, and/or with their local staff. Consequently, some CSOs were of the opinion that humanitarian relief was not reaching areas that needed it, especially those outside of Port-au-Prince. The argument these CSOs were making was that international organisations need more efficient coordination at a regional level, rather than through a heavy over-centralisation of coordination based in Port-au-Prince alone. In this context, decentralisation would mean that the power and authority within the aid effort was better delegated to local areas

where aid can be delivered more efficiently, and where contact with people could be more direct, especially in the case of internally displaced people. This delegated approach could improve aid delivery and facilitate a bottom-to-top approach.

Capitalising on natural decentralisation

“Centralisation in the decision-making process greatly affects Haiti. Too much centralisation is a key problem because it reduces politically the whole country to only the capital. After the earthquake, there was an opportunity to decentralise because people moved to places outside of Port-au-Prince, but they are slowly returning due to the centralisation of aid in the capital and the lack of opportunities created elsewhere.”

Fr Lazard Wismith, Director of the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service (SJRM). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

A level of natural decentralisation happened shortly after the earthquake as a result of the displacement of people forced to move outside the capital to look for resources and help. Haitian people are now slowly but surely returning to the capital due to the lack of opportunities elsewhere – but at the time of fieldwork were returning to a destroyed city that was unable to provide them with livelihoods or basic services.

Interviewees raised the point that the PDNA action plan talks about decentralisation and the need to create opportunities outside the capital, but offers no tangible or specific programmes. They argued that the immediate need to provide for the almost 1.5 million people internally displaced out of Port-au-Prince should have been seized as an opportunity to implement a decentralisation programme.

They expressed the view that choosing where to build houses is key because the need for housing and employment will bring people back to the capital. There should be a clear plan for rebuilding outside of the capital.

Some Haitian organisations believed that decentralisation has not taken place because the Haitian elite does not have any interest in decentralising political, social or economic power from the capital. For that reason, decentralisation, which has been included as part of the PDNA action plan, is a legitimate concern of CSOs and should be used to kick-start and overcome any resistance to the process.

A suggestion made by Haitian CSOs is to build the capacity of municipalities to create vital opportunities (employment, housing, basic services) locally. They suggested that this is the only way to ensure that people stay in the regions rather than going back to Port-au-Prince.

5 Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations

“There are two important communities that have not been fully recognised for the role they played in supporting earthquake victims. They are Haitians themselves and the Dominican Republic (DR). They provided relief to the victims in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. And they will continue to do so.”

Fr Lazard Wismith, Director of the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service (SJRM). Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

For many years prior to the earthquake, Dominican-Haitian bi-national relations were tense and complex due to a number of unresolved issues including migration and trade. If there were disagreements between the two countries, this was reflected in immediate border closures, which directly affected the border market trade and diplomatic relations, and cases of reported violence against Haitian migrants.

The Haitian government position was characterised by non-confrontation with the Dominican Republic (DR). Since 2008, however, Haitian officials have been more ready to call for better protection for the rights of Haitian migrants in the DR, and to publicly express their opinion regarding bi-national relations.

The position of the Dominican government has also transformed after the earthquake. Much of the relief effort has been coordinated through the DR, and two international summits have been held in the DR, at which the Dominican government pressed for support for Haiti and delivery of funds pledged by donors to support the reconstruction efforts in Haiti.

For this report, we asked Haitian and Dominican organisations if they perceived any differences in bi-national relations; if they have included this issue in their work; and if they could offer suggestions and share examples of good practice. We also looked at how we could consolidate positive and constructive experiences that could help both countries in framing a holistic approach to development on their shared island.

Bilateral Mixed Commission

In an effort to overcome the tensions that existed between the two countries, both governments met in 1996 to set up a Bilateral Mixed Commission. Its aim was to formalise cooperation in areas of mutual interest such as trade, border trading and migration (including, importantly, the issue of repatriation of Haitian migrants from the DR). Later, the Commission’s mandate was expanded to include other topics such as agriculture, culture, education and youth.

As it turned out, the Commission met only sporadically and remained largely inactive. However, on 31 July 2010, two official delegations led by the Dominican Republic Foreign Minister, Carlos Morales Troncoso, and Haitian Prime Minister Jean Max Bellerive, met in Ouanaminthe (a Haitian northern border town) to officially re-launch the Bilateral Mixed Commission. This suggests that positive bilateral engagement is key in the agenda of both countries.

This Commission announced that it would be working on particularly sensitive issues such as trade, migration, agriculture and the environment. It is these issues that are vital to the long-term development of and cooperation between both countries.

Many Haitian and Dominican CSOs supported the setting up of the Commission but were concerned that it could become a bureaucratic burden if it is not working properly. Both Dominican and Haitian CSOs have said that, more than ever, a formal agreement between the two nations is needed to tackle issues around migration, including the formalisation of migrant flows and the regularisation of immigrants.

Interviewees were fully aware that the earthquake triggered a great deal of solidarity and unity within the DR in support of its Haitian neighbours. This was immediately demonstrated by action to assist the victims, both by government and civil society. For example, Ayuda à Haiti (Help Haiti – a platform of Dominican organisations) was formed, initially to coordinate humanitarian relief, and supported by international organisations like Progressio.

At the time that these interviews took place, both Dominican and Haitian organisations expressed concern that if there was no official dialogue established between the two countries, the 'informal engagement' that arose in response to the earthquake might not last. Although in subsequent months the two countries have had more fluid exchanges, it is also necessary to settle the basis of more long-term relations. This Commission might provide the formula for ensuring stronger bi-national relations.

A combined effort could help the two countries to reinforce a positive change in hearts and minds of people on both sides of the border, helping to change 'bad' stereotypes, which in turn could improve tolerance, respect and mutual appreciation. Joint bi-national development programmes would recognise the interconnectedness of the two countries and the necessity of working together for their common benefit.

Bi-national markets and border opportunities

Haiti is a viable trading partner for the DR, and there are border-trading opportunities that should be capitalised on which could benefit both economies – and the decentralisation process in Haiti.

Haiti's decentralisation process could increase opportunities for employment and trading in the border area. However, more investment is needed plus a formalisation of the trading opportunities. This could be delivered through a bi-national trans-border programme that tackles development and trading at the same time.

Haitian migrants and the documentation process

Haiti's geographical proximity to the DR coupled with extreme poverty has fuelled Haitian migration to the DR. Before the earthquake, an estimated 1 million Haitian migrants were living in the Dominican Republic.²³ After the earthquake, it is expected that there will be a significant increase in migration to the DR as many Haitians seek to go there to rebuild their lives and provide better livelihoods for their families.

Haitians living in the DR are mostly illegal immigrants who, due to their status and lack of documentation, are extremely vulnerable.²⁴ While the DR has taken few steps to recognise the rights of Haitian migrants within its borders, the Haitian government has also failed to address the serious lack of documentation among Haitians. At present, most Haitians enter the DR without proper documentation. Suitable IDs are needed to facilitate and regularise migration and help protect the rights of this important group.

The regularisation of Haitian migrants, the control of migration flows and the respect of basic human rights during deportation continue to be unmet challenges. Political willingness is needed to ensure that these problems are solved once and for all.

Some Dominican and Haitian CSOs have made provisions and arrangements to overcome obstacles arising from the centralisation of documentation processes. For example, the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service in Jimaní has a partnership with the Haitian consulate, whereby every Thursday an adviser from the consulate travels to Jimaní and receives applications for Haitian passports. Over a period of two months, this initiative facilitated the issue of 200 passports. More initiatives of this kind to provide legal and humanitarian assistance to Haitian migrants in the border area were seen as important by CSOs.

“The earthquake has opened a space for positive and constructive engagement between the DR and Haiti. There is potential now for developing new models of cooperation and engagement, which is coherent with improving bi-national relations. Both nations should be searching for opportunities to capitalise on the solidarity and willingness expressed by their own people.

“Both Presidents (DR and Haiti) have the opportunity to agree on solving specific issues that have remained unsolved for years, like in the case of migration. For example, the majority of Haitians enter the DR without documentation, so Haiti needs to provide documentation to those who leave the country. In return, the DR needs to protect their rights as migrants and labourers. A bi-national agreement on migration policy should now be the next step to protect the rights of migrants and better control the border. Documentation should be a matter of priority. But the question is whether there is enough political willingness in both governments to resolve these ‘thorny’ issues.”

Quote from a member of a Haitian CSO who wished to remain anonymous. Interview by Lizzette Robleto Gonzalez, May 2010, Port-au-Prince.

6 Conclusion

Key findings

1. There was great disappointment among CSOs about the lack of government action and visibility immediately after the earthquake, lack of coordination and leadership in delivering humanitarian relief, and lack of consultation over the reconstruction process including the PDNA and reconstruction action plan. This was affecting the level of trust between the Haitian state and its civil society.
2. There was a clear tension between pushing for new models of sustainable and inclusive development while simultaneously trying to respond to the crisis and rebuild Haitian infrastructure. Haitian CSOs felt that they were forced to play a dual role, and felt overwhelmed with the pressure of responding to immediate needs as well as attending to longer-term priorities.
3. Haitian CSOs were divided with regards to their position on engaging with the Haitian government and the reconstruction process. Some claimed that it is not worth being part of the Interim Commission; some others believe that this is important. It is vital to strengthen participation of Haitian CSOs in the reconstruction process. Without this, there is a significant risk that this important leadership group will be left out from decision-making concerning their country's future. If they are once again marginalised, their influence and support will be lost. The country needs to find ways to overcome these difficulties and build trust in order to ensure that a cross-section of Haitian voices can be heard, and their experience capitalised upon.
4. Decentralisation was seen as key for both the short and long term. Aid management was seen as becoming too centralised in Port-au-Prince and it was felt that opportunities were being missed to strengthen coordination and services at a regional level. It was argued that the Haitian government, supported by the international community, should promote development in other regions of the country in order to promote opportunities outside of Port-au-Prince.
5. Coordination and collaboration between international NGOs and other agencies was seen as paramount to avoid duplication of efforts and maximise resources.
6. Strong Haitian and Dominican bi-national relations were seen as vital to facilitate reconstruction efforts in Haiti, encouraging economic development, protecting the natural environment, upholding the rights of Haitian migrants, and maximising border trade opportunities.
7. A priority issue raised by interviewees was the need for specific action to ensure that vulnerable groups, especially women and children, receive special support to counteract the increased risk of sexual violence, forced prostitution and exploitation arising from the displacement of Haitian people from their homes and communities. The experience accumulated by Haitian women's organisations should be drawn upon.
8. CSOs wanted to see the strengthening of governance structures and institutions in Haiti through building the capacity and the skills of both government and civil society.
9. CSOs argued that specific measures to support local government should be a priority within response plans, including the adoption of mechanisms that facilitate local development such as participatory budgeting.

10. CSOs argued that Haiti needs to review, in the medium and long term, issues related to land tenure and land rights, due to their importance for sustainable agriculture and food production/food sovereignty.

Concluding remarks

The interviews conducted for this report offer just a snapshot of opinion within Haitian civil society at one moment in time following the earthquake of January 2010. But they do give us some clear messages that may help for the future, both in Haiti, and perhaps in other emergency responses. Since natural disasters in Haiti are, sadly, very likely to occur again, it is important to invest in building resilience, with investment in Haitian CSOs and community networks key to this.

It is a much repeated mantra of aid workers that with such a large, multifaceted reconstruction effort, involving a large number of actors, improving coordination is key, both to avoid duplication and waste, but also to ensure good ownership and unity around the process. Easier said than done, but the frustration of CSOs interviewed with the UN cluster system shows that 'poor coordination' once again tops the 'must try harder' list for emergency response agencies. In how many future emergencies will the same be said?

CSOs here have made a useful point that if more investment were made in local level, decentralised coordination structures, rather than heavily centralised structures – perhaps inevitably challenging for small local CSOs to engage with – these could well be easier for local organisations and communities to access and influence, and arguably more efficient and flexible, and less wasteful.

Similarly, building strong local municipalities, and helping local government to engage effectively with communities and CSO actors, has the potential to relieve pressure on the centre while improving the accountability and responsiveness of service delivery to communities – and indeed, local democracy. Decentralisation should then be a strong priority within the reconstruction process. Strategies including investment in local municipalities, creating employment in regional clusters, maximising opportunities in the border areas, and utilising government infrastructure outside Port-au-Prince to redirect bureaucracy, all warrant support.

It is also self-evident that to achieve long-term sustainable development, Haiti needs to build a united vision to progress the development agenda in the country. It is stating the obvious to say that these complex decisions should be fully informed by, and have the ownership of, a broad spectrum of Haitian civil society, including CSOs.

But throughout the interviews and questionnaires, Progressio staff noticed clear reluctance, on the part of Haitian CSOs, to directly engage with the Haitian government and the newly formed Interim Haiti Recovery Commission. Regrettably, the early months of the response may have reinforced marginalisation in some areas rather than reducing it. This may not be surprising to those familiar with Haiti, but it is worrying and unhelpful. In times of pressure, policy makers might overlook this disengagement in the face of pressing short-term humanitarian priorities. But it would be very wrong to ignore the problem.

In the IHRC and the PDNA, and other processes, policy makers are shaping the foundations for development in Haiti. If collectively we wish to see a lasting, sustainable recovery that is owned and managed by Haitians, then this clear sense of exclusion must be tackled. In a country like Haiti where the bridge between the Haitian state and CSOs was already weak, it warrants more attention, not less. External agencies have a responsibility to use the power and influence they hold to support the engagement and strengthen the capacity of Haitian CSOs, not merely as service delivery agents for the programmes of international NGOs, but as leading actors for development and reconstruction.

A word on the importance of the relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti is needed. Cross-border cooperation will assist the position of Haitian migrants, improve trade, and better manage environmental resources in the interests of both countries. Investing in constructive processes that strengthen ties and relationships remains important. The Bilateral Mixed Commission is a key initiative for supporting the dialogue between the two countries in areas such as these, but must be more than a bureaucratic mechanism.

Perhaps inevitably, reports such as this are good at highlighting problems. But finally we should be encouraged. The extraordinary efforts made by Haitian civil society in the aftermath of this devastating earthquake are a sign of the potential that exists for the sector to take on a much larger role in the future.

Haiti deserves a new beginning. All relevant players – decision makers, politicians, businesses, development organisations, CSOs and community members – will need to work together in the months and years ahead in order to achieve this.

Notes

- 1 Facts and figures in this paragraph are drawn from the Haiti Country Brief on the <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/HAITIEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22251393~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:338165,00.html> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 2 Haiti Country Brief on the World Bank website: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/HAITIEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22251393~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:338165,00.html> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 3 CIA Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 4 GlobalSecurity.org: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/haiti/intro.htm> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 5 Haiti has an emigration rate of 7.7%, 64.3% of whom go to Northern America (Human Development Report 2009: http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_HTI.html accessed 7 October 2010). Major countries of destination of migrants from Haiti are Canada, the Dominican Republic, France, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, and the United States (Migration Policy Institute: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/countrydata.cfm?ID=460> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 6 Full figures are uncertain due to a number of variables, including lack of documentation prior to the earthquake, rubble still needing to be removed, and lack of proper statistics. The World Bank Haiti Country Brief estimates that at least 230,000 died (see reference 2). A Haitian government website cites: Dead – 217,366; Disappeared – 383; Injured – 300,572; Stricken Families – 286,912; Displaced – 511,405 (<http://haitiseisme2010.gouv.ht/> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 7 Reuters Alertnet: http://www.alertnet.org/db/an_art/59877/2010/06/26-155941-1.htm (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 8 This report follows the definition of civil society organisations quoted on the World Bank website: “community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and foundations” (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20101499~menuPK:244752~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 9 NGOs are defined by the World Bank as “private organisations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development” (quoted on Duke University Libraries website: http://library.duke.edu/research/subject/guides/ngo_guide/igo_ngo_coop/ngo_wb.html accessed 7 October 2010).
- 10 A 2008 survey by Transparency International ranked Haiti as one of the world’s most corrupt countries – Haiti is ranked 177 out of 180 (<http://www.infoplease.com/world/statistics/2008-transparency-international-corruption-perceptions.html#ixzz12hzaQrR3> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 11 The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat, in a news brief dated 6 August 2010 titled ‘Haitians have a right to minimum standards of safety’, quotes a statement by human rights lawyer William O’Neill made in November 2009 that the average Haitian was “much likelier to die from the acts of omission of building inspectors, transport officials, health inspectors, school administrators and the bureaucrats responsible for insuring that houses, shops, restaurants and roads are safe and sound” (<http://www.unisdr.org/news/v.php?id=14885> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 12 At the time of her appointment as Prime Minister, Michèle Pierre-Louis was Director of the Haitian human rights organisation FOKAL (a role she still holds). FOKAL supports “those sectors of the society most likely to bring about social change – principally children and youths, including youth associations (involved in media, cultural, and environmental activities) – and sectors of the society that have historically been marginalised such as the peasants and women” (<http://www.fokal.org/index-a.htm> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 13 The cluster response system is a UN system for the management of emergency responses whereby relief needs are divided into key sectors, each headed by a single organisation, usually a UN agency. The UN has stated that the extreme situation in Haiti exceeded the capacity of the cluster response system (http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2010/100224_Haiti.doc.htm accessed 7 October 2010).
- 14 Government of the Republic of Haiti (2010), Haiti Earthquake PDNA: Assessment of damage, losses, general and sectoral needs, pp1-2 (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/PDNA_Haiti-2010_Working_Document_EN.pdf accessed 7 October 2010).
- 15 See the Decree of the IHRC (http://www.cirh.ht/resources/IHRC_Decree.pdf accessed 7 October 2010).
- 16 As stated in the Decree of the IHRC, p4 (http://www.cirh.ht/resources/IHRC_Decree.pdf accessed 7 October 2010). According to the IHRC website, there are 27 voting members (14 Haitian members and 13 International members) and 3 non-voting members: a representative of national NGOs, Haitian diaspora, and international NGOs (<http://www.cirh.ht/index.jsp?sid=1&id=28&pid=2> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 17 “The IHRC is charged with continuously developing and refining Haiti’s development plans, assessing needs and gaps for investments, and ensuring that the implementation of development plans is coordinated, effective, transparent and delivers real change in the lives of the Haitian people. To do so, all post-earthquake related projects or programs funded by donors or non-governmental organizations are required to be submitted to the IHRC, as are private sector projects or programs deemed by the IHRC to be of ‘National Significance’.” (<http://www.cirh.ht/> accessed 7 October 2010).

- 18 The PDNA was carried out by “Over two hundred national and international experts [who] worked in eight themed teams: governance, production, social sectors, infrastructures, regional development, the environment and disaster risk management, cross-cutting themes and a macro-economic analysis”: Government of the Republic of Haiti (2010), Haiti Earthquake PDNA: Assessment of damage, losses, general and sectoral needs, p2 (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/PDNA_Haiti-2010_Working_Document_EN.pdf accessed 7 October 2010).
- 19 An aid ‘observatory’ is a structure that monitors aid expenditure as well as the reconstruction process in order to secure accountability and transparency. This observatory should have a series of agreed parameters or criteria that assess the effectiveness of programme aid implementation, to ensure that money is not wasted, and contracts are given to the best executor.
- 20 See ‘Land tenure and land policy’ extracted from Richard A Haggerty (ed) (1989) Haiti: A Country Study, GPO for the Library of Congress, Washington (<http://countrystudies.us/haiti/49.htm> accessed 7 October 2010).
- 21 Government of the Republic of Haiti (2010) Action Plan for National Recovery and Development of Haiti, p12 (http://www.haiticonference.org/Haiti_Action_Plan_ENG.pdf accessed 7 October 2010).
- 22 One lesson from the Indian Ocean tsunami response in 2005 is that both are important and need to be funded: see the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition synthesis report <http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/synthrep%281%29.pdf> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 23 UNCHR: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,MARP,,DOM,,469f3a7223,0.html> (accessed 7 October 2010).
- 24 For more on this topic see Wooding, B, and Moseley-Williams, R (2004) Needed but unwanted: Haitian immigrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic, CIIR (Progressio), London.