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Three Years After the Quake that Killed Hundreds of Thousands in Haiti, with 300,000 Still in Tents, a Question Arises—Where Is the Money?

by George Rodriguez
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On the third anniversary in January of the earthquake that killed 230,000 to 300,000 people and left 1.5 million homeless in Haiti, approximately 300,000 people are still lodged in tent cities (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2011). This, despite the international aid that profusely moved to this Caribbean island nation of some 9.1 million people, labeled the Americas' poorest country, where income for 78% of the people is less than US$2 per day (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010).

Reconstruction efforts, including massive housing, face obstacles because of the government’s lack of transparency and efficiency, as well as the absence of coordination between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), according to various observers involved in assistance.

By estimates from different sources, immediately after the event, official bilateral and multilateral donors pledged aid worth US$13 billion, some US$9 billion of which have actually landed in Haiti. Furthermore, a study released last month by the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti (OSE) and the Haitian government said the figure was disbursed during the 2010-2012 period.

But the aid does not seem to have completely trickled down to hundreds of thousands of Haitians in dire need of help, say both local and foreign observers of the national scene.

Jesuit faults lack of coordination among aid agencies

Haitian Jesuit priest François Kawas admits international aid has helped greatly but says an endemic lack of coordination both between NGOs and the government and among NGOs themselves has had a negative impact, compounded, he says, by a clash between President Michel Martelly’s administration and what the priest describes as powerful economic and social interests.

So Kawas told a conference on Haiti’s reconstruction, a gathering organized in the United Kingdom last month by three NGOs—the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Christian Aid, and Progressio.

Within that context, some 300,000 Haitians are still precariously lodged in tent towns, according to the religious leader. "I don't think there is real coordination," Kawas said, quoted by the British newspaper The Guardian, regarding distribution of aid. "We have observed a lot of conflict on the ground in Haiti, conflict, for example, between Venezuelan and French NGOs, between French NGOs and Cubans, between Americans and Cubans in Haiti."

"For example, the Canadian agency for international development—they have a lot of projects in Haiti, but we don't see coordination with USAID," Kawas added, referring to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the US Agency for International Development.

"Sometimes they do the same work, so it's also a real problem for the government," the priest said. "I would like international actors to help the government to have a plan, a national plan of
construction." In the priest’s view, the big problem for NGOs and for many actors in Haiti is the lack of a national plan for construction. "The government speaks about that but right now, we don't see this plan, and we know that this plan is very important for the country, for the development of the country."

As an example, Kawas pointed out that "the NGOs are working separately, in isolation, and there is no coordination, there is no government plan, so, for me, it's a real problem for the development of the country. And the international organizations do the same."

Another major setback is the Caribbean nation’s dysfunctional public administration, which Kawas described as "a real problem," because "the government cannot put its policies into practice if the public administration does not function, so it's a real necessity for foreign governments to help the Haitian government find solutions."

As an additional example, regarding the negative influence of powerful interests, the priest underlined the dire situation the homeless are still coping with in tents, a circumstance derived from the attitude of economically and socially powerful families on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital, which was severely hit by the 2010 earthquake.

"I think it's difficult to rehouse these people because most of the land surrounding Port-au-Prince belongs to very powerful families and those families don't want to give the land to the state to rehouse people," Kawas explained, according to The Guardian. "It's a very big problem because those families are very powerful and they have many political resources so they can influence the decisions of the state."

Study shows lack of transparency, accountability

The US-based Center for Global Development’s senior fellow Vijaya Ramachandran and research assistant Julie Waltz said lack of transparency is a major flaw in both camps—the government’s and the donors’. "Most observers agree that the international response to the quake was overwhelming. Haiti received an unprecedented amount of support," but "where has all the money gone?" they asked in an article carried last month by The Guardian. "Three years after the quake, we do not really know how the money was spent, how many Haitians were reached, or whether the desired outcomes were achieved."

The authors reported that, "in a policy paper published in May, and in a more recent blogpost, we unpacked the numbers, many of which came from the UN Office of the Special Envoy. We found that about 94% of humanitarian funding went to donors’ own civilian and military entities, UN agencies, international NGOs, and private contractors. In addition, 36% of recovery grants went to international NGOs and private contractors."

"Yet this is where the trail goes cold—you can look at procurement databases to track primary contract recipients, but it is almost impossible to track the money further to identify the final recipients and the outcomes of projects," Ramachandran and Waltz warned. "Breaking the figures down by donor isn't much better: 60% of US-disbursed recovery funding is ‘not specified,’ as is 67% of Canada's aid to Haiti. Data for the European Commission shows that 67% of humanitarian funding and 43% of recovery funding is to other international NGOs."

"Data reporting becomes even more opaque when one looks for the specific organizations, agencies, firms, or individuals that have received grants or contracts in Haiti. Detailed financial reports and
rigorous impact evaluations are hard to find," the authors said. "There are some exceptions, but most organizations only publish case studies or other descriptions of their work; negative outcomes or failures are almost never documented."

As an example, Ramachandran and Waltz revealed that, "of the thousands of projects being run in Haiti, we found only 45 organization- or project-level evaluation reports at the end of 2011. A total of 23 reports do not have specific project data, and only four have any specific detail about how the money was spent."

The authors said, as a contradiction, that while the government is expected to improve transparency, the aid community does not do so, failing to provide the public with adequate data. On this, Ramachandran and Waltz quoted Finance Ministry Director General Pierre Erolde Etienne as saying that the "real problem is that we do not have—or, I should say, we have only very little—overall information on aid."

"We are required to be transparent. We publish the financial information relevant to the execution of our budget. All we ask is for the same transparency from our donor friends, which should help both us and them," said Etienne.