

To Help Haiti, Upend Aid Habits, and Focus on its Women

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The growing discourse around solving Haiti's many tragedies has, for the most part, ignored the unique plight of that nation's women, and their equally essential role in recovery. Even before the earthquake, Haiti's women suffered disproportionately, and recently announced aid may already be headed in the same wrong direction as in decades past. This article highlights pre-earthquake Haiti's poverty and gender discrimination, and discusses how external assistance can end bad practices, especially by targeting women.

Before the Haitian earthquake, malnutrition was widespread and more than half of the Haitian population lived on less than one dollar a day and 78% on less than two, according to the World Bank. On top of this impoverishment, Haitian women and young girls were victims of rampant rape and violence. Mass rapes by feuding political gangs occurred daily. Individual rape by export-processing factory managers was often a condition for continued employment in jobs that paid a pittance.

Before the earthquake, Haiti was a militarized state where kidnapping and killing males occurred regularly. A flood of foreign arms and troops contributed to an atmosphere of brutality. Women eked out bare livelihoods in female headed households made common by a high rate of male deaths and desertions.

Over \$5 billion in official donor "aid" disbursed over the last two decades to Haiti hardly helped and often harmed poor Haitian women and men. Aid from international financial institutions (IFIs) and USAID mainly benefited rich donor countries and Haiti's tiny elite, not the poor. For example, past Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loan conditions required Haiti to remove agricultural tariffs which swamped the country with cheap US rice. Haiti's loss of agricultural tariffs, combined with continuous US and European protective agricultural subsidies, decimated poor Haitians' farming livelihoods. Women who composed the majority of farmers, as men migrated to cities alone, were especially hurt by such unfair aid conditions.

Another example of squandered aid was that despite repeated IFI investments in Haiti's water supply systems, clean and affordable water remained elusive for most Haitians. As in most poor countries, Haitian women were predominantly responsible for fetching water, often contaminated, for their households.

IFI and US aid for health infrastructure did not fare better. I remember visiting a beautiful IFI-built hospital in a remote mountainous area of Haiti that never opened its doors for lack of funds to pay medical staff. Multinational corporations which won the contract to build the hospital were the only aid beneficiaries, not the poor and ill. Paying contractors to build hospitals without funding staff provides a heartbreaking lesson to upend our public aid to better assist Haiti's poor women and men.

Following the Haitian earthquake, the IFIs and USAID are proclaiming a batch of new assistance

programs, although their past massive aid kept Haiti's poor women or men mired in poverty and caused massive Haitian debt. Repaying debt far outweighed Haiti's spending on health care, education, infrastructure or agriculture which could have improved poor men's, women's, boys' and girls' livelihoods. Civil society advocacy recently triggered partial but incomplete cancellation of Haiti's crippling IFI debt. To "help" Haiti cope with the earthquake, the IMF just approved a US\$102 million interest-free loan for Haiti but devastated Haiti must still repay the principal. While the Managing Director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, has pledged to work for complete debt relief, the IMF's Executive Board has yet to make a similar commitment. Although the IDB cancelled \$511 million in debt last year, there is \$441 million that has been accumulated since 2004 that has not been cancelled. While the IDB is considering cancelling the remaining debt, so far it has not done so. Burdened by continuing debts to the IFIs approximating \$677 million, Haitian women and men will remain immiserated.

Moreover, US and IFI "aid" are likely to continue zealously privatizing basic Haitian services and reconstruction, hitting a restart button on the same old corruptions and dysfunctions that impoverished Haiti before the earthquake, despite untold billions in aid.

What is to be done?

Because Haiti's government has been crippled, poor Haitian women and men would benefit most from: (1) Strings-free grants from humanitarian civil society organizations having well defined implementable social projects such as providing healthcare and potable water; and (2) Official grants to the Haitian government which needs resources to provide essential services, without harmful policy conditions attached. International aid pledges must respond to the needs and requests of the Haitian people and respect Haiti's sovereignty. For Haiti to get on its feet for the first time, poor Haitians, rather than multinational private contractors who pursue private profit rather than poverty elimination, must receive aid.

Haiti must be freed of all debt obligations which IFIs and foreign governments have continuously extorted illegitimately. At this moment when Haiti needs help to recover from the earthquake and develop more equitably than in the past, donors must not create new Haitian debt.

While Haitians are struggling for survival, post-earthquake projects present an opportunity for Haitian women to assume leadership roles in their communities. Women's access to essential services which they traditionally provided to their households and communities, and women's involvement in rebuilding their country, must be priorities. Women must participate meaningfully and actively in the current donor-organized "post-disaster needs assessments" and in all stages of post-earthquake projects ranging from identifying priority needs, to developing reconstruction plans, to building and sustaining safer communities for all citizens.

All aid activities must plan for women's safety.

Haitians themselves, especially its women, must lead reconstruction plans if Haiti is to become a nation where people will have adequate livelihoods and live safely.

Since Haitian women are pillars of their communities and households, the way forward should aid Haiti's women, disproportionately. It is a truth of aid in developing nations: when you ship dollars to men, too many of them will be wasted on the men themselves. When you aid a nation's women, their children and communities will rise.

The international community would do best by supporting the resilient Haitian population, especially its women, to achieve their hopes for the future.

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