The NGO Republic of Haiti

How the international relief effort after the 2010 earthquake excluded Haitians from their own recovery.

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The wire fence that surrounds Haiti’s National Palace in the heart of the country’s capital has been covered, recently, with a green mesh. Inside, the multi-domed structure has been reduced to rubble, finally knocked down after it was all but destroyed by the country’s deadly 7.0-magnitude earthquake on January 12, 2010. The worst national disaster in the history of the Western Hemisphere, the temblor killed an estimated 200,000 people in just thirty-five seconds.

A lone blue-and-red Haitian flag waves from the gigantic pile of rubble. Along the western edge of the palace grounds, lots that once housed government ministries and the Palace of Justice continue to lie vacant. More than 16,000 civil service employees died in the quake. Now their offices are occupied by new employees in temporary buildings or even tents. Some still lack standard operating equipment such as telephones and computers, along with a backup electrical system to deal with blackouts, a routine occurrence here.

Several miles northwest of downtown sits the Logistical Base, or Log Base, the headquarters for the United Nations and its recovery efforts. Here, it’s a different world. Within the massive blue-and-white compound are revamped trailers, golf carts and more glistening public toilets than any other place in Haiti. (Log Base is germ—and cholera!—free.) Flowers line the walkways, and machines blow a cool mist into an outdoor restaurant whose menu, on one random day, included sushi, jasmine rice, German potatoes, Brazilian cheese bread, halal shawarma and Häagen-Dazs ice cream. The American dollar, not the Haitian gourde, is the currency of choice.

Shortly after the earthquake, Log Base became the nerve center of the international recovery effort, the place where aid organizations could coordinate reconstruction strategies. At the peak, there were more than seventy coordinating meetings each week among aid agencies and other interested parties—though not all interested parties. Few Haitians can cross from one side of the compound’s walls to the other. To do so requires
identification documents and an invitation from someone on the inside, two things very few Haitians have. And when they do, they find that most meetings are held in English, not Creole or even French. When a steering committee for NGO coordination was elected in July 2010 at Log Base, sixty international organizations cast their votes, but since there were no local NGOs present, Haitians were not represented.

Welcome to the NGO Republic of Haiti, the fragile island-state born, in part, out of the country’s painfully lopsided earthquake recovery. On one side are the thousands of aid organizations that came to Haiti with the entire international aid budget in their bank accounts (several billion dollars among them) and built a powerful parallel state accountable to no one but their boards and donors. On the other are the many representatives of the Haitian people—elected officials, civil society leaders, businesspeople—who remain broke and undermined by the very NGOs that swooped in to help. And in between? The Haitian people themselves: impoverished, unemployed, homeless and trapped in a recovery effort that has all too often failed to meet their needs.

This was not how the recovery was supposed to unfold. When the NGOs first descended post-quake, there was all sorts of sensitive donor-speak about respecting the needs and input of the Haitian people. At the International Donors Conference “Towards a New Future for Haiti,” held on March 31, 2010, eleven weeks after the quake, donors pledged $5.3 billion for Haiti’s recovery, to be disbursed over two years. They also agreed to work in partnership with the Haitian government to adhere to “the principles of aid effectiveness and good humanitarian donorship and to build on lessons learned.” They created the Interim Haitian Reconstruction Commission (IHRC), also known as the Clinton Commission after the man who was its public face, to help them do just that.

But as the money flowed in, this dream of a happy partnership failed to materialize. From the very beginning, NGOs followed their own agendas and set their own priorities, largely excluding the Haitian government and civil society. In the first rush of aid after the earthquake, just 1 percent of all donor funds available for emergency assistance was channeled to the government, while just 1.8 percent of reconstruction funds donated by other countries was spent on budget support for it. Haiti’s NGOs fared even worse, receiving just 0.4 percent of the international aid. Almost two-thirds of the rest of the money raised—in the billions—remains in the bank accounts of the aid money managers that were there before the quake: international NGOs, the World Bank, the UN, the Inter-American Development Bank and mostly Western building and consultancy firms.
Meanwhile, the money that did reach Haiti has often failed to seed projects that truly respond to Haitians’ needs. The problem is not exactly that funds were wasted or even stolen, though that has sometimes been the case. Rather, much of the relief wasn’t spent on what was most needed.

The recovery effort has been so poorly managed as to leave the country even weaker than before. “The billions of dollars in earthquake aid have further marginalized the Haitian state, Haitian social organizations and Haitian businesses,” said Camille Chalmers, a Haitian economist. “They did not benefit and were not involved in how the money was spent. The government of Haiti received only 1 percent of the emergency funds,” barely more than the government of the Dominican Republic, which hardly even felt the quake.

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To see the dynamics of the NGO Republic at work, one need go no farther than Léogâne, a port town of 134,000 residents just twelve miles southeast of the earthquake’s epicenter and fifteen miles west of the capital. Léogâne was flattened by the quake—tens of thousands of its residents died—and it quickly became a hub of NGO activity.

“In the Republic of NGOs, Léogâne is the City of NGOs,” said Joseph Philippe, 33, technical coordinator of the Municipal Civil Protection Committee of Léogâne.

The relief workers who flooded Léogâne, clogging the streets with their SUVs, were often young and idealistic, eager to join the effort to “build back better,” as Bill Clinton phrased it. But how these NGOs wanted to build Haiti back was often driven more by donor objectives than by the needs of the “beneficiaries,” as they are called in NGO-speak. What the people of Léogâne needed when their city was destroyed was new, safe housing on dry land. What they got instead were square boxes in the middle of a flood plain.

Léogâne sits at the intersection of three rivers. Yet not a single NGO was willing to work on shoring up the river bank and creating a sustainable drainage system, according to Philippe. It wasn’t part of their plan; it wasn’t what they’d been fundraising for. Philippe said that only the Canadian Center for International Studies and Cooperation helped reinforce the river banks with rocks, reducing the flood risk by 15 percent. Good, but hardly enough.

“The irony,” said Philippe, “is that all the projects that the NGOs did put money into will get washed away in the floods that will come. The NGOs will continue to finance projects in underdeveloped countries in an underdeveloped way.”