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Haiti's earthquake: a Port-au-Prince report

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Summary:

Six months after the catastrophe in Haiti's capital, the realities of insecurity, displacement and poverty co-exist with opportunities and agents of reconstruction. Johanna Mendelson Forman offers a view from the ground.

I visited Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, from 22-25 June 2010, to attend a meeting of the [Clinton Global Initiative](#) [1] Action Group (CGI). The meeting, convened by the CGI and the [Digicel Foundation](#) [2], brought together working groups for Haiti that included NGOs and foundations interested in supporting different projects in the reconstruction of Haiti. I was part of the energy group.

I have visited [Haiti](#) [3] on more than forty occasions since 1994, when I was part of Usaid's [Office of Transition Initiatives](#) [4], involved in the reform of the security sector (and especially the demobilisation of the Haitian armed forces). Since then I have worked in Haiti on a variety of issues, including energy-security, peacekeeping, and disaster assistance.

In 2005-06 I worked as a senior advisor of the United Nations special representative to the secretary-general (SRSG), Edmond Mulet. Most recently I have pursued the development of alternative and sustainable-energy resources through the [Jatropha Foundation](#) [5] and the [Latin American and Caribbean Council on Renewable Energy](#) [6]. In Washington I am a [senior associate](#) [7] of the Americas Program and the William E Simon chair in political economy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies ([CSIS](#) [8]). I attended the CGI meeting as a representative for the energy sector.

The view from the ground

I had not been in Port-au-Prince since the tragic [earthquake](#) [9] on 12 January 2010 which left 220,000-300,000 people [dead](#) [10] and 300,000 injured, and 1.5 million Haitians homeless. Six months after the disaster, its scope is evident all over the city - in the number of crushed buildings and the proliferation of camps of internally-displaced persons (IDPs). No section of the city is untouched by the destruction of the earthquake. Rubble abounds. People who tear down the remains of houses and buildings throw it out into the street, but the clean-up of this debris seems disorganised and slow. Many streets contain mountains of stones, and few dump-trucks are available to help clear away what had been excavated.

The tragedy of [displacement](#) [11] hits you the moment you arrive. There are camps in front of the

airport, on traffic circles, and in any vacant space available. People living [12] in these camps now have more durable tents, but the rains come every afternoon to make the ground soggy and unpleasant. The camps [13] I saw all had latrines or portable toilets, but it is unclear whether these are adequate for the number of occupants in each camp. A doctor who accompanied me on one of the tours suggested that the absence of epidemics now does not mean infectious diseases are no longer a threat to Haitians: it is just that the incubation time is taking longer than expected. There would eventually be an increase in diseases unless these camps are closed and people resettled.

In contrast to the squalor that is associated with the camps, Haiti's street-life is vibrant. Markets exist, food-vendors abound. There are children dressed for school and attending classes again, although those in camps are not so fortunate. Both policemen and women are out and on patrol. When I questioned a hotel-owner about security she commented that the police had actually been helpful and respectful of people, a change that is needed if confidence is to be rebuilt [14] in the security sector.

As the work of reconstruction finally gets underway the political discussion is now focused on the work of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission [15] (IHRC). This body, created as an eighteen-month administrative institution to support the ministries, and provide grants for projects that are needed to rebuild, is still in its early days and not fully staffed. A representative from McKinsey, the US firm helping identify talent for the commission, was seeking names and resumes of people to support the new body. It is clear, however, that the commission will need until September 2010 to get fully staffed and moving. There are capable people working to advance the process, but it is still moving slowly.

The United Nations is also present. The UN's special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG), Edmond Mulet [16], is doing an excellent job in helping the process, and is well-regarded by Haitian leaders. The work of the SRSG is now focused on helping to move the political process forward toward elections scheduled for 28 November 2010, with the UN and the Organisation of American States (OAS) providing the important support [17] needed to hold them.

That an election can happen is clear. But the opportunity to hold a simultaneous referendum that would have addressed some of the more vexing constitutional issues (such as the question of whether dual-citizenship Haitians would be allowed to run for national office) has been lost. A referendum could also have addressed the synchronisation of elections so that Haiti could avoid holding yet more elections for the senate and assembly. It is important, however, that the presidential and legislative elections advance; and that process is moving, albeit slowly, forward.

Agents and opportunities

Haiti, like any post-disaster environment [18], is filled with contractors and entrepreneurs eager to make a dollar in the wake of the earthquake. There are many organisations - for-profit and not-for-profit - on the ground, and seeking contacts [19] with Haiti's government to make proposals and identify new opportunities (especially in areas outlined in the government's reconstruction-paper delivered at the United Nations-sponsored international donors' conference [20] on 31 March 2010).

The top priorities are infrastructure and capacity-building (in the capital, cities around the country, and the ministries themselves). There will ultimately be funding for a multitude of projects, but no money is flowing yet - so everyone is trying to see what the IHRC does [21], and

how everyone can get a piece of the action. Some groups want to help import heavy equipment to continue clearing rubble, an ongoing and major activity. At present, rubble is being dumped in the ocean rather than recycled to use as roadfill that could help in the construction of the new roads so desperately needed in Haiti.

Every sector is eager to work: water engineers, social engineers, international business groups who see Haiti as a platform for reconstruction. But investment risks are still high as long as Haiti's basic governance structures - its legal institutions, its commercial codes, and its ability to support financial [22] needs - are not in place.

Haitian business leaders also see this time as a moment to develop their interests, to help serve as interlocutors for international companies, and to expand. Those who import food, or own warehouses or ports, are in a privileged position to gain from this tragedy. They also recognise that they have a responsibility to their nation - an important shift in attitude that underscores the changing dynamic of the private sector in Haiti over the last two decades. The passage of United States legislation that supports the textile-assembly area (the Haiti Economic Lift Program [23] [Help]) will provide a much-needed post-earthquake boost [24] to that sector. But it is not enough to ensure greater sustainable economic development in the long run.

Haiti's relations with the Dominican Republic [25] are good, but the window to use the earthquake as an opportunity to improve the overall relationship is waning. In the first few post-earthquake months the Haiti-Dominican relationship was at a new high; the latter's President Leonel Fernández [26] contributed to the relief effort, hosted donor meetings, and served as the natural launch-point for rebuilding. But as time has passed, older business rivalries have re-emerged. It is important that Haiti-Dominican relationships are sustained, especially in key areas such as responses to natural disasters, climate change and shared environmental challenges, the development of alternative fuels and the use of renewable-energy systems. There is ample opportunity for collaboration, but the timing must come soon to take advantage of current goodwill (see "Haiti's earthquake: a future after mercy [27]", 26 January 2010).

The Haitian government in fact has the biggest opportunity since the return to democratic governance in 1994, when a large multinational force was involved in the country. The government, however, is still quite fragile [28]. It needs (and is getting) outside support, but it lacks the capacity to do the things that are urgently needed - moving IDPs, improving education, reforming financial institutions.

The familiar time-lag between donations and disbursement is clear [29] in Haiti. There is no shortage of pledges. But the NGOs are the main source of liquid assets that can be used at this time. The extent to which donor-coordination is working is evident in the camps, but is less clear in relation to providing support to the displaced and those living outside of Port-au-Prince. Haitians need to see progress soon - in the availability of even temporary jobs and housing, and a sense that their country is moving beyond a humanitarian crisis to a transitional rebuilding phase.

What struck me most, in meeting some of the groups who will benefit from the work of the CGI, was the enthusiastic intention among young entrepreneurs to make Haiti better. For example, the motto of a group making solar-lampposts and phone-chargers, Enersa [30], is "no village is too remote". These young men and women are building and installing solar-panels in Haiti, making them theft-proof, and helping communities with security by providing light and a source of electricity so students can study after dark.

Similarly, a group of young filmmakers and media specialists are providing big-screen

movie-shows under the stars ^[31] - *Sinema anba Zetwal* - to people living in camps around the country. Such cultural events include a measure of community-building and cultural solidarity, even in spite of miserable physical conditions. There are also groups making modified charcoal cooking-stoves from scrap metal that allow charcoal to burn with 50%-plus more efficiency. These stoves are intended to be part of a new renewable-energy chain of stores to be launched by EarthSpark ^[32], an NGO focusing on sustainable-energy solutions for Haiti.

Risks and challenges

Six months after the earthquake, Port-au-Prince is still the scene of a major disaster. Three areas must be addressed immediately:

- * safe temporary-housing sites that also provide other services, including job-creation programmes
- * security, including the protection of women and children in the IDP settlements
- * the capacity of Haitian government ministries to create policies that will promote real solutions to such essential needs as electricity, the rule of law and transparent elections, thus also reducing the risk for investors.

On the surface life has resumed to normal, but the city is also a place where people are still frightened to be in their own homes lest another tremor occur. Many homes where the displaced lived were rental-units. The misery of those who have neither a home to return to or the prospect of any new structure in the near term cannot be exaggerated. There is still inadequate informal-sector employment and few other work opportunities. Many children are not in school because the buildings were destroyed.

The overall message is an urgent need for more tangible ^[33] signs of progress in Port-au-Prince. Progress must come in the form of basic needs - adequate shelter and food, but also attempts to employ more individuals in short-term projects (eg clearing the streets, or training and education, such as literacy lessons for people living in the camps).

If street-security is good, the security in the tent-city camps is deteriorating. The reasons are manifold; among them are said to be the presence of those who escaped ^[34] prison in January and of drug- and human-traffickers, and the return of gangs. In this there is a greater risk of insecurity for those living in the camps, and corresponding great importance in providing security and work in their former neighbourhoods.

Haiti will need strong leadership from its own citizens and from the international community to emerge from this crisis. This includes focusing on funded groups able to implement a coordinated vision of reconstruction that targets short-term needs - housing, schools, job-creation, and loans for small businesses - all of which ensure life can go on. Meanwhile, the elections ^[35] are scheduled for November 2010 are already a focus of activity, with candidates making pledges and jockeying for positions in their respective parties (see Amélie Gauthier, "Haiti: empty stomachs, stormy politics ^[36]", 21 April 2008).

As I walked around Port-au-Prince I was struck by the enormity of the task ^[37] at hand, but also the potential to do things that would help make life better for so many people. But it was also clear that there were no quick fixes. There is an important lesson here about the timing of programmes. Haitians need policies to make progress - in economic development ^[38], rules and regulations for investment, resources to help mitigate risk - while *also* working at a micro-

development level that brings clear signs to those who have suffered the most that this is *not* “business as usual”. Whether this can happen is still uncertain. But if Haitians are to benefit from the promises made to them about a new beginning, the pressure on governments, international donors and NGOs must continue. This is the time to raise voices and redouble efforts, to match encouragement and dialogue with action, and - most of all - to create tangible results which Haitians own and can build on.

Sideboxes

'Read On' Sidebox:

[Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) ^[8] (CSIS)

[Clinton Global Initiative](#) ^[1]

[Enersa](#) ^[30]

[Interim Haiti Recovery Commission \(IHRC\)](#) ^[15]

[Digicel Foundation](#) ^[2]

[EarthSpark International](#) ^[32]

[Jatropha Foundation](#) ^[5]

[Haiti - International Donors Conference, 31 March 2010](#) ^[20]

[World Bank - Haiti](#) ^[38]

[IFRC - Haiti](#) ^[39]

[Latin American and Caribbean Council on Renewable Energy \(LAC-CORE\)](#) ^[6]

Peter Hallward, [Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment](#) ^[40] (Verso, 2008)

[Haiti Support Group](#) ^[41]

Sidebox:

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Also by Johanna Mendelson Forman in **openDemocracy**:

["Things Kofi Annan can do now"](#) ^[42] (16 April 2003)

["From the ashes: a multilateral mission?"](#) ^[43] (21 August 2003)

["The UN in 2003: a year of living dangerously"](#) ^[44] (18 December 2003)

["The nation-building trap: Haiti after Aristide"](#) ^[45] (11 March 2004)

["A 21st century mission? The UN high-level panel report"](#) ^[46] (25 November 2004) - with D Austin Hare

["In Larger Freedom: Kofi Annan's challenge"](#) ^[47] (23 March 2005)

["President Bush discovers the world is flat"](#) ^[48] (18 September 2005)

["Open veins, closed minds"](#) ^[49] (7 May 2009) - with Peter DeShazo

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Created 07/13/2010 - 21:37

Links:

- [1] <http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/>
- [2] <http://www.digicelfoundation.org/>
- [3] http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_htm/haiti.htm
- [4] http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/transition_initiatives/
- [5] <http://jatrophafoundation.org/>
- [6] <http://www.lac-core.org/>
- [7] <http://csis.org/expert/johanna-mendelson-forman>
- [8] <http://csis.org/>
- [9] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8466385.stm>
- [10] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8510900.stm>
- [11] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/doc116?OpenForm&rc=2&emid=acos-635p2k&secid=9>
- [12] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MCOI-87ACRM?OpenDocument>
- [13] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8614278.stm>
- [14] <http://web.peaceops.com/archives/author/johannamendelsonforman>
- [15] <http://www.cirh.ht/index.html>
- [16] <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2010/sga1228.doc.htm>
- [17] http://www.oas.org/en/news/haiti_earthquake_relief/haiti_earthquake_relief.asp
- [18] <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE6685BK20100709>
- [19] <http://www.haitireconstructionfund.org/hrf/>
- [20] <http://www.haiticonference.org/>
- [21] <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/07/10/v-fullstory/1725088/bill-clinton-on-haiti-my-job-is.html>
- [22] <http://www.microfinancegateway.org/p/site/m/template.rc/1.26.12644/>
- [23] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704423504575212663488826000.html>
- [24] <http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/04/30/am-us-program-lifts-haitis-textile-duties/>
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- [26] <http://www.la-republique-dominicaine.org/Dominican-Republic-Leonel-Fernandez-President-of-the-Republic.html>
- [27] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/...../johanna-mendelson-forman/haiti%E2%80%99s-earthquake-future-after-mercy>
- [28] <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/0706/1224274102723.html>
- [29] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/wyclef-jean-minus-the-smell-nothing-has-changed-in-six-months-2025103.html>
- [30] <http://www.enersahaiti.com/>
- [31] <http://www.greenff.org/news-a-events/2010/91-report-on-cinema-under-the-stars-in-cite-soleil>
- [32] <http://www.earthsparkinternational.org/>
- [33] http://www.as-coa.org/articles/2508/Six_Months_Later:_Roadblocks_to_Haitis_Reconstruction/
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- [37] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/us_and_canada/10596902.stm
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- [41] http://www.haitisupport.gn.apc.org/ab_who_main.html

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- [56] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/haiti_3298.jsp
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