

The NGO Republic of Haiti

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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.

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.

Consider the cholera epidemic, which erupted in October 2010 and infected nearly half a million Haitians within the first year. Clean water has always been a scarce resource in the country, and its scarcity is one of the reasons the disease ripped so quickly through the population. Yet out of \$175 million requested by the United Nations to help stanch the tide of the epidemic in late 2010, less than half came through. Meanwhile, a number of NGOs (including but hardly limited to UNICEF, the William J. Clinton Foundation and the British Red Cross) responded to the epidemic by launching a large-scale awareness campaign to combat cholera, stressing the importance of good hygiene—and then relocated displaced Haitians to areas lacking shower facilities and hand-washing stations. By August 2011, almost a year after cholera was introduced, only 12 percent of the tent camps equipped by NGOs had hand-washing stations, 8 percent less than the slim March 2011 figures. And only 7 percent of the camps surveyed by the UN had access to clean water, compared with 48 percent in March that year. Of 12,000 latrines needed, only 4,579—38 percent—were functional.

Because the destruction wreaked by the earthquake was so severe, no one expected a perfect recovery. Some 1.5 million people had been left homeless or displaced, while roughly 300,000 buildings were destroyed or severely damaged. And Haiti’s government, already weak and plagued by inefficiency, had been decimated. By his own admission, Rene Préval, president at the time of the quake, was “paralyzed” in the months after the disaster. His successor, Michel Joseph Martelly, was elected more on his popularity as a carnivalesque singer and pop star (with deep connections to the infamous Duvalier dictatorship crowd) than for his reconstruction plan.

Even so, 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."

Housing is perhaps the most serious example of this "underdeveloped" approach to recovery. The earthquake destroyed 80 to 90 percent of buildings in Léogâne, leaving tens of thousands homeless. In response, several dozen NGOs involved in the city's reconstruction—including large ones such as CARE, Habitat for Humanity and the Spanish Red Cross—pledged collectively to build 28,560 transitional shelters. But these "T-shelters," as the name suggests, are temporary structures meant to last two to three years—just long enough to bridge the gap between emergency tarps and more permanent replacement housing.

"The expression 'T-shelter' is, in my opinion, a way to skirt the question. What is it...temporary housing? Not good practice. Transitional shelter? No. Temporary shelter? Not really. Let's call it 'T-shelter,'" says Priscilla Phelps, one of the chief authors of *Safer Homes, Stronger Communities: A Handbook for Reconstructing After Natural Disasters*, which was compiled by the World Bank just before the earthquake.

Most of the T-shelters are slapdash and shoddy, and so they quickly deteriorate; they're also meant for rural rather than urban settings. As Phelps explains: "That means they are too large for the plots, made of material that isn't easy to recycle or upgrade, not suitable to the already unsafe living conditions of the country, too expensive"—she estimates the real cost for each is \$6,000 to \$10,000, not \$2,000 to \$3,000 as the NGOs claim—"and have been built in places where occupants had no land tenure security." This last flaw, she adds quickly, "is purely the government's fault."

T-shelters come in a variety of shapes and materials. The best are wooden boxes with a window—and from there, the standard drops appreciably. In the case of Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical organization led by the Rev. Franklin Graham that brought Sarah Palin to Haiti in December 2010 to showcase its work, the signature blue-tarp structures are sweltering and flimsy, better suited to drying clothes than accommodating a family of five. On a recent visit, two women coddling an overheated baby were killing time in front of their Samaritan's Purse-provided shelter because they said it was too hot inside. Holes in the plastic had been patched with pieces of corrugated iron.

CHF International, which receives a large percentage of its budget from the US Agency for International Development, is another of the NGOs that raced to build T-shelters—in CHF's case, tentlike structures made of steel or wooden frames lined with rice-sack siding. It built 1,700 in

Léogâne alone. But these allegedly hurricane- and earthquake-proof T-shelters are transparent and deteriorating.

When asked about the inferior quality of the materials, a CHF spokesman said he was “genuinely sorry to hear that the plastic has not always lasted as well as it is meant to.” For subsequent projects with a longer-term focus, CHF is now using other types of material. These projects, however, are not in Haiti.

According to a report by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, shelter provision was based more on supply than demand. The report noted that agencies decided to build T-shelters rather than repair homes or provide rental support in large part “based on their previous know-how, supposed ease of implementation, outcome control, liability concerns and/or visibility.” Visibility to donors was a particularly influential factor.

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Sitting in his office, which could be mistaken for an empty storage room, Philippe said the gap between the aid providers and the needs of the recipients was infuriating and humiliating. “Our priorities are not the same as theirs, but theirs are executed. In theory, NGOs come with something, but not with what the population needs.” He said it without malice, but his resignation was obvious. “We have no choice but to accept what they bring us. But then, when it doesn’t work and it’s not what we need, the state is blamed, not the NGOs.” When asked what the NGOs did leave behind, he laughed. “Visibly, not very much. You are journalists—go look for yourself.”

In fact, an example was just outside, where an unfinished steel frame for an office building stood. According to one of the town’s general directors, a Dutch company had the building contract, but then the money ran out and the company left. As of this fall, the mayor was still trying to find out who was responsible for the mess.

The story of Haiti is at once a narrative of one country’s post-disaster travails and a case study of a more widespread global phenomenon—a cautionary tale that can be applied to dozens of the forty-eight nations classified by the UN as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). These countries account for more than 880 million people (about 12 percent of the world population) and include places like Afghanistan, Cambodia, Rwanda and Yemen. Many rely on foreign aid as their major source of income. Without it, their governments can’t survive.

Critics have taken to calling these LDCs “NGO Republics”—countries where nongovernmental organizations and wealthy donor entities have created parallel states endlessly richer and, at the end of the day, more powerful than the national governments themselves. Ultimately, it’s the NGOs that decide how these governments will spend the funds and run their countries, to the tune of tens of billions of dollars a year.

In Haiti, as with many NGO Republics, the level of aid has varied over the years, but it almost always exceeds the government’s own national budget. Between 2005 and 2009, aid in Haiti ranged from approximately 113 to 130 percent of the total revenue available to the government. After the earthquake, the flow of relief and recovery aid significantly exceeded—by more than a factor of four—the government’s internal revenue.

The Haitian government doesn’t even know how many NGOs are operating within its borders. No one does. According to Bill Clinton, the UN special envoy to Haiti, the country has the second-highest number of NGOs per capita in the world (India has the highest). He cited the World Bank figure of 10,000 NGOs in Haiti in 2009, at about the same time that Jean-Max Bellerive, then the

Haitian minister of planning, estimated that there were 3,000. The Haitian government currently reports 560, though it admits the number operating there is higher.

The earthquake unleashed the NGO hordes on Haiti, but the truth is that NGOs have been a major presence for more than two decades, since before the turmoil in the country that followed the end of the father-son Duvalier dictatorship in 1986. The US government, which had been a key benefactor of the twenty-nine-year Duvalier regime, later encouraged Haiti to lower import tariffs on American rice from 35 percent to just 3 percent. American rice flooded the Haitian market; a similar demise for Haiti's sugar and coffee industries soon followed.

By the mid-1990s, the Haitian agricultural sector—in which 60 to 70 percent of the Haitian population made a living—lay in ruins. NGOs then swooped in to “rescue” the population, largely sidestepping the various Haitian governments, which they deemed too weak and corrupt to consider working with directly. A World Bank study from the mid-'90s captured the reasoning: “Most donors...are reluctant to [let funds flow through the Government of Haiti], for fear of decreased implementation efficiency and effectiveness.”

These concerns were not entirely unfounded. Haiti's governments do have a history of weakness and corruption—a legacy, in large part, of the country's colonial past and neoliberal present. Since 1986, there have been more than a dozen heads of state, a handful of coups and military regimes, and a US-led military intervention. Governments seem to lose power almost as quickly as they gain it (particularly if they thwart the will of their neighbor to the north). In 2011, Haiti ranked 175 out of 183 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

And yet, faced with a government that many felt had been too badly decimated to lead a successful recovery effort, the international community certainly had other choices than to ignore it completely. At the very least, it could have found ways to engage the Haitian people in decisions about the country's future.

“NGOs should have integrated Haitians from the very beginning in the relief efforts so that the recovery had more Haitian ownership when it kicked in,” said Haitian policy analyst Jocelyn McCalla. “What you ended up with is a nation more deeply dependent on international charity, saddled with leaders whose first reflex is to beg, even while they claim otherwise.”

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There's an old Haitian proverb, *Sak vide pa kanpe*—an empty sack cannot stand up. And that is precisely the predicament of Haiti's government today. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people are here delivering aid, but they are doing functions that should be done by the Haitians,” said Nigel Fisher, the deputy special representative for the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti. His office, in one of Log Base's air-conditioned prefab trailers, is furnished with blue leather chairs and coffee tables spread with brochures. “You cannot complain about failures of the Haitian state if you don't support it to grow stronger. For decades, we have not invested in that very much.”

Haitians have not been silent in the face of this exclusion, and a growing number have begun thinking of aid workers as thieves at best, colonizers at worst. In December 2010, some of this anger erupted in a protest letter written by the Haitian members of the IHRC to commission chairs Bill Clinton and then-Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive. In the letter, they complained of being “completely disconnected from the activities of the IHRC,” as well as having “time neither to read, nor analyze, nor understand—and much less to respond intelligently—to projects submitted.” Their complaints went largely unheeded.

A spokesman for one of the largest UN organizations in the country offered a stunningly blunt portrait of this dynamic. Asked whether the government of Haiti has ever told him what to spend donor money on, the spokesman, who insisted on remaining anonymous, said: "Never. They are not in the position, because they are financially dependent. Recently, there was a government press conference. There was nothing 'government' about it; we organized it and told them what to say." He chuckled, then added: "Very sad, really."

As for the aid community's claim that it has been playing a supporting role and letting the Haitian government lead the reconstruction effort, he said, "It's a lie. It's tragic, but it's a lie."

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For all the disappointments of the recovery process, there have been some successes, instances of NGOs working closely with Haitians to meet their needs as well as possible. One example of this kind of effort is the hospital being built by Partners in Health (PIH), an organization that strives to be just that: a partner with Haiti's government. Located in the town of Mirebalais, some thirty miles from the capital, the hospital is Haiti's biggest reconstruction project in the health sector and was designed specifically with the people's needs in mind. When it's completed, it will have seven buildings, 320 beds, a high-tech operating theater, even a koi pond. It will train nursing staff and doctors. And it is a public hospital, one of the very few in the country.

"If we had made this a private hospital, like other NGOs do, we would be creating a parallel system. But public healthcare is in our ideology," said David Walton, a 32-year-old doctor from Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, who divides his time between there and Haiti. "The officials we are dealing with are clever, cooperative and motivated," he said as he surveyed the progress last spring. "And they have ideas. But nobody listens to them. Few NGOs even try working with the government. It is much simpler to work around them. No one looks over your shoulder, into your accounts, or asks questions. My work could also be so much easier this way—but who am I accountable to?"

Walton acknowledged that even though the Haitian government owns the hospital, it can't run it. "The officials we're dealing with are passionate about caring and want to do the best they can. But they can't just now. They are void of the human and financial resources to do their job." PIH will run the hospital for them, logistically and financially. "At the end of ten years, let's see where we are."

PIH recognizes that none of this will be easy. Though it has enough money to hire doctors and nurses, it has not yet hired many of them—not for a lack of applications (there have been more than 6,000) but of qualified professionals. And it worries about being able to extricate itself from financial responsibility in ten years. Still, it has a plan and a commitment to building Haitian institutions and power, as opposed to so many other NGOs, which these days are busier scaling down their projects than figuring out ways to improve them.

One of the final insults experienced by almost any NGO Republic is that its donors decide not only where and how the money will be spent but also when it is no longer needed—which is what is happening in Haiti now. Aid is drying up. Though the international community has delivered just a bit more than half of the \$5.3 billion originally pledged to Haiti—52.3 percent as of the end of September—there doesn't seem to be any plan to make up the difference. Only 52 percent of the \$300 million the UN and its partners requested to cover humanitarian aid in 2011 was funded. The figures for this year are worse.

As these dollars dwindle, aid groups have been focusing on trimming back their operations or simply getting out by whatever means necessary. NGOs have stopped virtually all water deliveries to the camps, and they no longer repair or clean portable toilets. Meanwhile, an aid listserv, created to

share situation reports and humanitarian bulletins, is being used by some aid workers to unload their personal effects and post rental vacancies. A recent deal was in the leafy downtown neighborhood of Pacot: \$1,850 a month for a four-bedroom home complete with three round-the-clock security guards. To put this in perspective, the NGOs employing these same workers are offering tent-camp dwellers a one-time relocation gift of \$500, paid directly to the landlord for a year's rent. In the absence of a widespread housing solution, this is what the international aid community has come up with.

"The emergency is over, as far as donors are concerned," said Valerie Amos of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

In reality, however, the emergency is far from over. Nearly 400,000 people still live in tent camps, along with dogs, chickens, rats, garbage and overflowing toilets. Thousands more have retreated to earthquake-shattered houses or other makeshift structures forged out of bits of tarp and tent.

Haiti's current prime minister, Laurent Lamothe, is calling for a new partnership with the NGOs that would "define a society in the image of what the Haitian people want." He is also advocating new laws that would exert some control over what the NGOs do in the country and how.

But until that happens, hospitals, schools, roads and public institutions of all kinds will remain as broken and neglected as the National Palace had been. Tellingly, that symbol of the country's sovereignty was torn down in the end not by the Haitian government, but by Sean Penn's NGO .

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P.S.

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