

BUILDING BACK BETTER

HAITI FACES A NEW FUTURE AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

No. 13 / March 2010

Overview

Haiti faces an enormous challenge after the earthquake on 12th January. Not only does its destroyed infrastructure have to be rebuilt, but first and foremost, a stable state has to be established. The earthquake caused a disaster with such catastrophic consequences because it hit a country whose government was virtually incapable of acting even before the quake.

Efforts must now be introduced simultaneously on various levels in Haiti. The country needs a comprehensive and integrated concept for a new start as soon as possible. It is vital that the lessons learnt from the tsunami disaster of 2004 and various state-building processes are taken into consideration. Both state structures and the local ownership of the Haitian people have to be strengthened. Given the weakness of the country's political systems and the low level of civilian organisation, this will be no easy task.

On 12th January, Haiti was hit by an earthquake. Reaching 7.2 on the Richter scale, this was the worst earthquake to strike Haiti in 200 years. The epicentre of the earthquake was only 25 kilometres from the country's capital city of Port au Prince, and damage was devastating. According to the Haitian government, over 220,000 people lost their lives in the disaster and 1.5 million became homeless. In some towns, around 90 percent of buildings were destroyed.

The fact that the earthquake could unleash such destruction was not just the outcome of the force of nature, as we saw not long after when a much stronger earthquake struck Chile. The reasons for the catastrophic consequences of the quake are of social origin. Haiti was one of the world's poorest countries even before the earthquake. Around 65 percent of its 9.4 million inhabitants live below the absolute poverty line. Almost two million people are chronically undernourished, half of the population can neither read nor write and child mortality is exceptionally high at 13.2% (per 1000 live-births). In line with this poverty, only very few buildings comply with the construction standards that could have reduced the number of victims. The Haitian state is practically non-existent. In the "Index of State Weakness" published by the "Fund for Peace", Haiti ranks 12th, only just behind Somalia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.

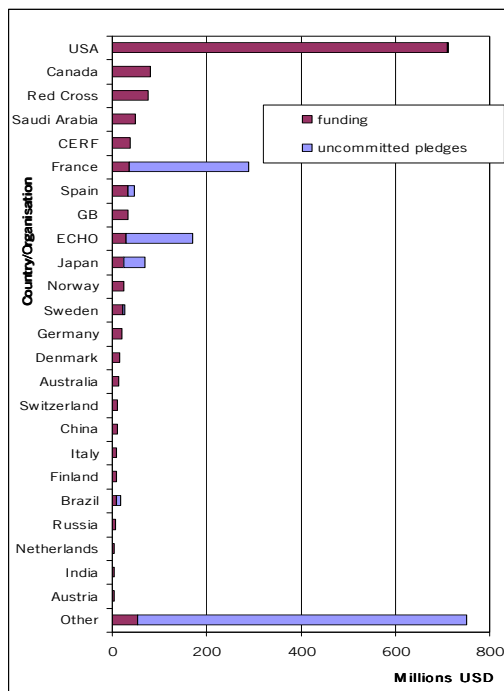
Learning from mistakes

The huge wave of solidarity that brought billions in financial aid into the country - similar to the tsunami in south and south-east Asia in December 2004 - could now be regarded as a sad opportunity for Haiti. For years, the country attracted little attention and financial aid from western donor countries. Now financial pledges have been made from Equatorial Guinea and Botswana to the United States. The United States alone has offered 710 million and Canada over 80 million US Dollar in financial support. According to UN OCHA, the European Union has pledged over 170 million US Dollar in earthquake aid. Non-governmental organisations have also recorded high income from donations.

Given the general conditions in the country, however, the reconstruction of Haiti represents an enormous challenge. Strictly speaking, the country needs to be built from scratch, not reconstructed. And it is not just a question of developing infrastructure, but of establishing stable state structures. The international community therefore faces a completely new situation. Never before has a natural disaster hit an already collapsed state with such a devastating impact and also caused its physical breakdown. Despite this unique situation, Haiti can learn in many respects from past assignments. When long-term plans are made, the experiences gained from various state-building processes

and relief efforts after the tsunami in south-east Asia should be drawn upon. Apart from improving the coordination of aid and involving the local population and local structures more actively in efforts, this includes developing quality standards for reconstruction that also take into account disaster-prevention measures.

Humanitarian aid in Haiti according to donor countries and organisations



Source: Relief Web

Ensuring the coordination of long-term aid

Given the country's lack of infrastructure, it was not surprising that supply shortages initially occurred. At the small airport in Port au Prince, only a few planes can land daily. The airport was severely damaged by the earthquake, and because of its hilly location, the city can be reached only via two main roads. Transportation in the city was initially hampered by rubble and debris. In the first few days after the earthquake, communication networks broke down completely.

Numerous local and international relief organisations already active in Haiti before the earthquake lost their buildings and important infrastructure, staff were injured, they lost relatives and some are severely traumatised. Considering the difficult initial conditions, emergency aid was organised with surprising efficiency. Although the UN was itself severely affected by the earthquake, coordination efforts were introduced very quickly compared with the tsunami in 2004. German NGOs found an additional coordination body in the form of the Tech-

nische Hilfswerk (THW), which facilitated coordination among the individual organisations. However, the principal challenge of coordination efforts is the long-term development of the country. Apart from developing operative coordination structures for the acute response phase, it is now important to set priorities in terms of conceptual planning. Haiti needs a long-term general concept geared towards sustainability, which coordinates and streamlines the different construction measures. Strategies to closely coordinate emergency aid, reconstruction and long-term development have to be devised. A concerted effort now has to be made to develop this concept. Experience drawn from tsunami relief operations show that only then is it possible to build the country in an orderly way. If this process is delayed, many of the interventions by the numerous organisations that are under cash flow pressure will be in vain.

Increasing the ownership of Haitians

Developing this concept and building the country can only occur if the Haitian government and population cooperate closely. One of the key criticisms of tsunami aid was that the local population was not involved enough in the planning and implementation of projects. In some cases, existing local structures were even sidelined and replaced.

It is not yet clear to what extent these mistakes are being repeated in Haiti. However, initial warning signs suggest that lessons learnt have not always been put into practice. The Haitian President René Préal, for example, complained that his government was not included in the coordination of relief measures and that financial aid for the relief effort was going to foreign organisations. At the same time, many relief organisations are obviously having difficulty finding local partners to support development efforts. State administrative structures have been severely affected and local civilian organisations often lack the means to implement complex projects. Moreover, Haitian organisations are sometimes indirectly excluded from the UN's coordination meetings. Because of the international nature of the meetings, many of them are held in English.

But there are also some positive examples of the Haitian people's involvement in the reconstruction process. In a joint committee, around 150 Haitian government officials and 90 international experts, for example, are currently drawing up a plan for the reconstruction of the country on the occasion of the donors' conference in Haiti on 31st March. It is essential that this process be continued.

However, in view of the country's weak political structures and low level of civilian organisation, finding reliable and capable partners and increasing the ownership of Haitians in the state-building process will be one of the major challenges in the next few months.

Combining infrastructural development with the development of state structures

One of the most urgent tasks in Haiti is the development of a functioning infrastructure. Infrastructural development should be organised in such a way that income-generating activities are quickly created. This increases purchasing power and stimulates local markets again. Not long after the earthquake struck, the country's main food supply problem was not the availability of goods but the lack of necessary income among the population.

At the same time, it is important to gear infrastructural measures in the emergency relief stage to long-term disaster prevention. Rubble clearing, for example, can be combined with measures to protect embankments and hills. In the rehabilitation phase, these measures should then be supplemented with measures to build quake and hurricane-proof buildings, targeted reforestation and training in eco-friendly farming methods. Local governments and civil society have to be taught how to protect themselves more effectively against future natural disasters.

It is important that the infrastructural development is closely tied in with the promotion of state empowerment. On no account should the international community make the mistake of resorting to quick solutions. It is tempting to fall back on "instant" approaches and impose a ready-made infrastructural concept on Haiti that is based on our own ideas. The Haitian state must be put in a position to define conditions for the reconstruction of infrastructure and basic services in the fields of health and education itself. It would be fatal if development organisations and consulting companies were to poach the few capable members of the government available - in order to guarantee that their resources are used quickly - and thereby weaken the state further.

The key for the solution of many problems lies in rural areas

The fact that the earthquake struck Haiti's capital, Port au Prince, with such magnitude meant that many relief measures were initially concentrated on the urban area. It would be fatal, however, to neglect rural regions in the long term. Not only have many rural regions in the south of the country been devastated by the

earthquake (the German government responded by focusing efforts on the region around Léogane), but the north of the country has also been under enormous strain as a result of refugees flooding in from Port au Prince. UN OCHA currently estimates over 600,000 internally displaced persons in the rural regions of the north and west of the country. Numerous households have expanded in size many times over so that supply shortages also exist in rural regions.

Above and beyond this, the key to the solution of many of Haiti's problems lies in rural areas. The rural areas in Haiti have significant potential. This potential should be developed now – not least of all to solve the problems of the capital Port au Prince with its chronically high unemployment rates. Jobs have to be created here to offer the influx of urban dwellers a long-term perspective. Many of the refugees are young people. Micro credit programmes can offer them prospects for the future.

Given the significance of rural development for the future of the country, it is important that the decentralisation process, which Haiti is currently modelling on the examples of Peru and Ecuador, is supported. By assigning greater political power to the levels of the provinces and local authorities, the principle of self-help is reinforced and problems are tackled where they occur.

Food security a top priority

Food security based on local production should be a priority in the planning of the country's future development. Haiti has to become more self-sufficient in terms of food supply as soon as possible. It was not without reason that Haiti's President Préval appealed to Barack Obama to stop food aid as soon as possible. He justifiably feared that external food aid could compete with national production. During the food crisis in 2008, Haiti experienced the painful consequences of the country's reliance on food imports from the USA. Because of soaring world market prices, large sections of the population – particularly urban dwellers – could no longer afford such basic foods as rice and corn. Hunger riots were the result.

The solution to the food problem also lies in rural areas. In the present situation, small-scale farmers urgently need seed and tools because agricultural production already begins in March. But long-term solutions to the food supply problem are also needed. Property and land ownership has to be urgently clarified. Conflict over land – the land users are not always the landowners – and uncertain prospects for the future resulting from this often stand in

the way of medium-term investments. In this context, "land grabbing", the quick sell-off of land to large agricultural enterprises from the Dominican Republic, should be watched closely. Furthermore, the country's reliance on food imports has to be reduced and more effective ways of protecting local markets against subsidised international products have to be considered.

In terms of food supplies, it is therefore not a question of restoring pre-earthquake conditions but of developing a modern, sustainable agriculture which can contribute towards long-term food security.

Special funds are needed

According to estimates from the Inter-American Development Bank, the development of Haiti could cost up to 14 billion US dollars. So far, the German government has held back with financial pledges. By international comparison, the country has a poor record.

Against this background, it is extremely regrettable that the budget committee (Haushaltsausschuss) of the German Bundestag did not decide to set up a special fund for the reconstruction of Haiti. The establishment of a special fund in connection with the tsunami in 2004 proved exceptionally successful. It permits far greater flexibility and would also prevent Haiti's reconstruction from being carried out at the expense of other developing countries.

The allocation of funds by national and multi-lateral donors should be based on a variety of funding instruments. However useful budget support is – also in promoting Haiti's own responsibility – the support of civil organisations should not be neglected since they can be an important corrective to the state's work.

Financial support should also be organised in the long term in a less crisis-oriented way. Dependent on natural disasters and changing governments, payments in the past have been subject to such extreme fluctuation that long-term planning in Haiti has been virtually impossible. Haiti needs a reliable perspective. And German politics should contribute towards this.

Sources

Bündnis Entwicklung hilft (2010), Grundsätze für den nachhaltigen Wiederaufbau in Haiti, Diskussionspapier
www.entwicklung-hilft.de

Maihold, Günther (2010), Haiti: Was kommt nach der Katastrophe? Optionen für die internationale Gemeinschaft, SWP Aktuell.
<http://www.swp-berlin.org>

OCHA (2010), Haiti - Internal Displacement and Population Figures (28 February 2010)
<http://www.reliefweb.int>

OCHA (2010), Haiti - Earthquakes January 2010, Total Humanitarian Assistance per Donor as of 05-March-2010
<http://www.reliefweb.int/fts>

Author

Dr. Katrin Radtke
Advisor for Development Policy and Humanitarian Aid
Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V.
Friedrich-Ebert-Straße 1
D-53173 Bonn
katrin.radtke@welthungerhilfe.de
Phone: +49-228-2288-112