The Applied Anthropologist

Rising from the Wreckage: Lessons Learned from the 2010 Haitian Earthquake Response

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Abstract

In many ways, the 2010 Haitian earthquake presented a perfect storm scenario, as the natural disaster negatively impacted an already fragile society, compounding preexisting vulnerabilities. Due to the myriad of complex challenges this context presented, it is unsurprising that post-response evaluations of the humanitarian response have offered many critiques. As such criticism is carefully considered with the aim of improving future responses, three overarching lessons learned are presented: the need to cultivate and utilize organizational capacity, the need to develop and support strong leadership, and the need to improve and standardize data coordination. I present suggestions for strengthening these areas, while advocating that changes must further take place now within the institutional culture of the humanitarian enterprise.

Key Words:
Humanitarian enterprise, compounded vulnerabilities, institutional culture, capacity building, data coordination

INTRODUCTION

On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti, with the epicenter emanating only 25 km from the capital city of Port-au-Prince (USGS 2010). With fifty-two sizeable aftershocks in the days following (Sequera 2010), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimated that at least three million people were impacted (CBS News 2010). Confusion in the aftermath of the earthquake led to much dispute over reported figures. However, the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) states that approximately 220,000 people died, 300,000 people were injured, and 2 million people abruptly lost their homes (Bhattacharjee and Lossi 2011; Renois 2010). With a sudden decrease of about 2 percent in the population and about 20 percent homeless and in need of emergency aid, Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive also reported that civil society had utterly collapsed.

International resources poured into Haiti, with immediate priorities including search and rescue, medical services, emergency shelter, water and sanitation, food assistance, logistics, protection, and debris removal (OCHA 2010). Rubble posed a serious challenge for the humanitarian response, with survivors trapped under ruins and much of the crowded capital city impassable. To put such wreckage in context, the Associated Press reported that after six months of about 300 trucks working daily, 98 percent of the 26 million cubic yards of rubble remained (Katz 2010a). The spreading of diseases in the wake of the earthquake also caused major concern, a fear that proved to be well-founded when Haiti experienced a cholera outbreak in October, 2010 (Katz 2010b).

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: COMPOUNDED VULNERABILITIES

While the task of responding to such a large emergency was daunting in isolation, preexisting vulnerabilities compounded the severity of the crisis itself and the difficulty of devising effective response strategies. Long before the earthquake, Haiti was characterized by fragile governance, political insecurity, reduced public confidence, systemic poverty, poor infrastructure and structural challenges, and continual exposure to natural disasters (Patrick 2011). As the poorest country in the Caribbean, 50 percent of the population was living on less than USD$1.25 per day prior to the quake. Natural disasters have only worsened this island nation's plight, with nine significant storms hitting Haiti over the past twenty years, killing thousands and impacting millions more, and often derailing the government's development strategies. For instance, the World Food Program reported that due to the 2008 hurricane season, over 70 percent of Haiti's agriculture and infrastructure (e.g., bridges, roads, communication systems) were devastated, producing pockets of severe malnutrition. Thus, even prior to the 2010 quake, approximately 1.8 million people, approximately 20 percent of Haiti's population, were designated as food insecure (CNSA 2009). Furthermore, Haiti's basic humanitarian and development indicators ranged from "poor" to "alarming," with few societal safety nets in place and with social services like education falling almost solely to non-state actors and the private sector (OCHA 2010). Substantial human rights concerns, including inadequate access to primary education, widespread corruption and impunity, lack of access to justice, child labor, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and widespread

poverty and inequality, were all heavily reported before 2010.

The location of the earthquake's primary impact in the capital city of Port-au-Prince proved to be yet another compounding factor. Many post-response evaluations, including that of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), described the urban context, with its specific logistics and access hurdles, as one unfamiliar to many humanitarian actors (2010). Such difficulties were rooted in decades past, as unbridled urbanization had been a growing hazard in Haiti's metropolitan areas for decades, resulting in expansive shantytowns. Rapid urban population growth rates were also accompanied by poor quality construction, weak urban planning, and a dearth of unified, enforced building codes (Patrick 2011). Aftershocks became a major concern, as buildings continued to fall. Many residents, severely traumatized by their ordeal, refused to sleep indoors or seek medical care inside hospitals due to a fear of aftershocks (OCHA 2010). In addition to speculation that poor construction constituted a causal factor in the high death tolls, Haiti's sprawling urbanization also challenged the effective provision of humanitarian services by limiting relief worker access (IASC 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In such a difficult context, it remains unsurprising that evaluations of the disaster response have offered much criticism. However, before focusing on such critiques, recognizing the successes achieved by hardworking responders is also important. The IASC notes that the "humanitarian operation to a large extent achieved its immediate objectives and responded effectively to the critical needs identified" (2010: 1). It further cites that 4 million people received food assistance, 1.5 million received emergency shelter materials, 1.2 million were provided with safe drinking water, and 1 million benefitted from Cash-for-Work programs. We must therefore acknowledge these lifesaving contributions and salute the sacrificial commitments of those representing the humanitarian enterprise.

Yet we must also examine the weakest elements of the Haitian humanitarian response, remembering that such inspections can propel future improvements. In the provocatively titled article, "*Noli Me Tangere:* The Moral Untouchability of Humanitarianism," Fassin (2010) questions why the field of humanitarianism often eludes the critical analysis directed at other fields of human endeavor. Due to the "untouchable sacredness," i.e., the presumed morality of this field, he believes that many scholars avoid subjecting humanitarianism to the same critical analysis of other social science fields. I would agree and even further extend his premise by noting that because of humanitarianism's daily contact with the world's vulnerable and marginalized, close scrutiny of humanitarian actions are an essential application of the humanitarian theory of obligation, which requires ethical courses of action both morally and materially possible (Nockerts and Van Arsdale

2008).

Therefore, while recognizing countless contributions, three valuable *lessons learned* can be culled from this emergency: the need to cultivate and utilize organizational capacity, the need to develop and support strong leadership, and the need to improve and standardize data coordination. As we proceed, we must remember the cautionary words of Sir John Holmes, former UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs: "Valuable lessons continue to be learned in each and every emergency response. Some are very context specific – and Haiti has its fair share of those – but the general lessons must not only be identified, but acted upon. A lesson is not really learned until it leads to change in behavior" (IASC 2010: i).

Lesson Learned #1: The Need to Cultivate and Utilize Capacity-Building Strategies

Humanitarian assistance and development practitioners consistently advocate for relief efforts to tap into existing capacity, typically defined as a "conceptual approach...that focuses on understanding the obstacles that prohibit people, governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations from realizing their developmental goals, while enhancing the abilities that will allow them to achieve measurable and sustainable results" (CCHR 2011). For the duration of this article, I will additionally employ this term solely to refer to the institutions involved in the humanitarian process, including both international assistance enterprises and those of the host nation.

The United Nation's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is considered the architect of this concept, emphasizing the role of "institution building" since the 1970s (2006). According to ECOSOC, *capacity building* is a long-term continual process of relief and development efforts, as it involves all stakeholders, including international organizations, ministries, local authorities, community members, and academics. In 1992, the United Nations expanded this term to encompass the need to engage the target nation's human, technological, scientific, institutional, organizational, and resource abilities (1992). ECOSOC also stressed the importance of involving preexisting institutions in developing countries, rather than merely establishing new institutions. Thus, the obligation of humanitarian actors to modernize and/or support those institutions existing pre-emergency through sound policies, methods of management and revenue control, and organizational structures is implicitly highlighted.

Nevertheless, devising ways to utilize local capacity in the midst of an emergency is much more difficult than agreeing on its importance. The Haitian earthquake presented grave obstacles in this regard, as an admittedly weak government was further debilitated when the quake struck the country's political and institutional nerve center (Patrick 2011). Much of the capital city, exemplified by critical government infrastructure, was demolished, including the Presidential Pal-

ace, the National Assembly Building, and the main prison. Large numbers of public figures were also reported dead or missing, such as government officials, clergy, and foreign civilian and military personnel working with the United Nations and other international organizations. The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) headquarters also collapsed, killing scores including Mission Chief Hédi Annabi. In addition to the huge losses of human capital and leadership skills, thirteen of sixteen Haitian ministry headquarters were destroyed, prompting Bhattacharjee and Lossi to note, "the humanitarian response had to evolve in a situation of destruction, chaos, and severely damaged capacity of critical players who would normally be expected to lead the humanitarian response. To this extent, it can be said that Haiti has been an exceptional disaster, unlike any other disaster in recent humanitarian history" (2011: 9).

In this "perfect storm" scenario, the severe blow to Haiti's already precarious institutional infrastructure was coupled with the deleterious impact of the storm on the capacities, resources, and staff at the frontline of the response (IASC 2010: 1). In addition to the workers who were killed, for example, post-response evaluations by the ISAC speculated that the trauma experienced by surviving responders severely undermined the efficiency of their abilities (2010). If a continuum of disasters with regard to capacity-related challenges could be conceived, Haiti would surely represent the far end of the spectrum. How then can capacity, particularly with an emphasis on pre-emergency local institutions, be tapped into when institutions themselves are so heavily impacted? Although not an impossible conundrum, the Haitian earthquake laid bare more than just landscape. Even as the epicenter exposed the lack of a well-formulated urban response plan, so the earthquake also uncovered a lack of planning for capacity engagement in situations where already fragile institutions are further compromised.

The earthquake also revealed another capacity-related weakness: the lack of institutional capacity within international organizations themselves. Capacity building within international organizations is vital, as it encompasses all activities that seek to enhance the institution's ability to respond to the unexpected. Eade urges organizations to test their application of this principle by noting whether they are channeling capacity in ways that create synergy between different actors in the humanitarian landscape, and she advocates for increased *organizational capacity* to be developed internally by NGOs (1997). Similarly, Kaplan adds that humanitarian institutions must engage in internal capacity building before they can be effective facilitators of this concept in their targeted nations (2000). His steps to organizational capacity building include: 1) Developing a conceptual framework; 2) establishing an organizational attitude; 3) developing a vision and strategy; 4) developing an organizational structure; and 5) acquiring skills and resources. Kaplan contends that NGOs who complete these steps to organizational capacity building are

more likely to remain self-reflexive, adaptable, and critical, attributes that are indispensable in complex humanitarian emergencies.

As the Haitian disaster response is critically considered, the overarching lesson learned regarding capacity building can be summarized as follows. As mentioned, capacity building must include all local and international organizations, preferably beginning before an unexpected disaster strikes. The crafting of a humanitarian intervention should therefore focus not only on the needs presented, but also on how capacity can be channeled to meet those needs. In this way, each humanitarian intervention must be customized to the nature and scale of the disaster, while remaining cognizant of the local context and capacities. Humanitarian responders must also guard against falling into the trap of overlooking local capacities. Multiple evaluations have noted that early assessments lacked capacity assessments of Haitian stakeholders and contextual analyses (see Grünewald, Binder, and Georges 2010; Patrick 2011; Gleed 2011). A lack of such vital information resulted in the false perception that virtually no regional capacity existed to aid in the response, and a bias reportedly grew that saw Haitians as victims who had other things to do, rather than get involved in the design and implementation of programs (Grünewald, Binder, and Georges 2010: 42).

In spite of this reported (and possibly, unconscious) bias by some humanitarian actors, I believe that the Haiti disaster can serve as an important reminder that even devastated institutions and governments retain capacities. While material and physical infrastructure was demolished, evidence of strong relationships, institutional networks, organizational skills, important norms and values, and decision-making faculties remained. Humanitarian organizations must seek to find the important balance between responding rapidly to needs while also slowing down long enough to engage existing governmental, community, and civic institutions in the process, as such important sources of information can greatly impact the quality of results (see Grünewald, Binder, and Georges 2010: 42-43). Additional suggestions for capacity-related improvements include hiring local consultants to serve as contextual experts for international project staff. Although this concept is not ground-breaking, it remains in my opinion one of the most effective ways to pass on experience, knowledge, and technical know-how to nationals. Another option includes allocating a portion of a project's budget to train a local partner in managerial or technical skills, an option that would be compatible with Mark Schuller's call for USAID reform in strengthening the public sector in recipient nations (2011).

Lesson Learned #2: The Need to Develop and Support Strong Leadership

The exposure of weak capacity in Haitian governmental institutions and within humanitarian ranks also indicates the next lesson learned: the need for strong leadership in the

immediate aftermath of a complex emergency. Effective humanitarian leadership should be sought daily, with ECOSOC recommending that the humanitarian enterprise combine mentoring and coaching strategies to foster leadership development skills within their own ranks (2006). As important as what occurs during a crisis, preparatory measures implemented before an unexpected emergencies cannot be neglected. Just as with capacity building, the development of *leadership skills* should be emphasized a continually and meaningful fashion; this way, when disaster strikes, the foundation for a successful response is already laid. ECOSOC's research proposes that strong leadership by organizations (or by powerful forces within them) is the catalyzing force behind the achievement of humanitarian objectives because well-trained, capable leaders smooth the way for a rapid acceptance of post-emergency adaptations. High-profile emergencies also necessitate strong leaders who can navigate extreme and often highly-politicized environments in order to minimize the crisis's impact by fostering a sense of normality and collective learning (Boin et al. 2005).

With this in mind, the Haitian earthquake response demonstrates that humanitarian leadership must be supported from the start. In vulnerable environments, the humanitarian enterprise must ensure that experienced staff are in place and equipped with the necessary resources to cope with unexpected developments and ensure response plans. A lack of resources and carefully delineated responsibilities proved to be major obstacles to effective leadership in Haiti. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) noted that confusion abounded even among major actors such as MINUSTAH, IASC, and the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission regarding which organizations would take the lead on programs or decision-making with the Haitian government (Beunza and Eresta 2011). The IASC concurred, noting that "the initial leadership challenges do not bring into question individual performance, but rather emphasize the need to reinforce endorsed systems and structures and make sure individuals who are required to lead are provided with the means to do so" (IASC 2010: 2). Thus, leadership constraints should be considered and protocols established pre-disaster. For example, the IASC additionally maintains that the UN Humanitarian Coordinator's responsibilities were not able to be discharged by a single individual in the immediate post-disaster phase, a fact that should have been contemplated pre-disaster.

Following the earthquake, a multitude of humanitarian actors converged on Haiti, an unsurprising fact given both the magnitude and publicity associated with the crisis. This throng of responders strained existing leadership mechanisms, prompting the creation of a high-level Coordination Support Committee, comprised of senior MINUSTAH leadership, Haitian government officials, US military representations, UN delegates, and major donors (Patrick 2011). This committee, designed to manage coordination, ensure cooperation, and

allow strategic planning to be translated into action, saw certain successes, such as the creation of shadow clusters in neighboring Dominican Republic within ten days following the quake. Still, humanitarian leadership was hamstrung by the lack of a recognized, trusted space and a leader who could guide the decision-making process (IASC 2010: 17). Due to this leadership void in the immediate aftermath, response norms were established with a strong international military lead, particularly by US forces. While the engagement of armed forces can advance relief efforts due to their specialized skills and resources, a division of roles and responsibilities should be more clearly defined for future emergencies, with an emphasis on ensuring that the agreed upon protocols are strong enough to survive any initial chaos. Patrick asserted, for instance, that humanitarian reluctance to work closely with armed forces in Haiti resulted from a perceived blurring of the lines with regard to roles and responsibilities (2011). As a result, an underutilization of the military occurred in the early stages, as soldiers were primarily used as security escorts and only later as removers of rubble and restorers of infrastructure.

Along with delineating roles and responsibilities pre-disaster, a further recommendation involves creating back-up measures if key leaders are unable to discharge their duties. For example, in the emergency's aftermath, Haitian President Rene Préval essentially abdicated leadership due to his failure to react with authoritative strength. *Time Magazine* summarized President Préval's failure to take leadership with striking imagery:

> Imagine that your family was under attack and needed encouragement and courage... (and) advice about how to save themselves. Normally one would rush to them, comfort them, show them how to get together to help themselves. But that's not Préval's reaction to the destruction of his country. Instead he walks around with his shoulders down, like a beaten dog. He came out once right after the quake and announced that since his house had fallen, he had nowhere to sleep.... Since that memorable utterance he has said nothing at all to the Haitian people and very little else to the international community.... Meanwhile, Haitians have to deal with the boulders, the rubble, the dead.... Someone powerful but with a popular touch would be good ... someone who would speak to the people in a time of national emergency, not remain silent and staring. There's enough silence and staring to go around among the victims.... They don't need more of same from their President. Where's Haiti's Churchill? (Wilentz 2010).

As President Préval's behavior illustrates, all leaders do not rise to the occasion during complex humanitarian emergencies. Consequently, substitute mechanisms for such scenar-

ios, in which key leaders are unable to perform their duties or are killed (such as MINUSTAH Chief Hédi Annabi), must be devised. In referencing his view of the "disappointing" leadership display at the top of the UN system, Sir John Holmes insisted that agencies must be more "ruthless when appointing the right people to leadership roles…. There is no robust-enough system in the UN to address this dimension of leadership" (IRIN 2010: 3). I contend that the humanitarian enterprise must prepare now for future crises by developing vigorous leadership support systems. Leadership development must continue to be promoted from within organizations so that individual leaders will be empowered to make the difficult decisions that invariably arise in crisis circumstances. Yet even still, such a declaration is easier said than done, as changes in the institutional culture of the humanitarian landscape may have to occur before leaders are truly given the means to lead. Schuller rightly points out that even prior to the quake, the "donors' reward structure work[ed] against collaboration, coordination, communication, and participation" (2011: 1). A lack of collaboration will continue to work against the development of strong leaders in humanitarian crises, as it will most likely result in many who wish to lead but refuse to follow.

Lesson Learned #3: The Need to Improve and Standardize Coordination

As we consider how strong leadership can be supported from within the humanitarian framework, a crucial component involves buttressing the decision-makers with the type of sound information that can only be collected by *coordinated data mechanisms*. Decisions made in stressful emergency circumstances must be based on reliable data, a fact supported by the Haitian experience. Numerous evaluations have pinpointed a widespread perception of a coordination deficit in the initial phase of relief operations (Patrick 2011; IASC 2010; World Bank 2010). As previously described, some actors, including foreign militaries, supplanted humanitarian ground-level leadership, a fact that occurred due to strategic planning and communication breakdowns. This occurrence points not only to weak humanitarian leadership, but also to a lack of coordination with regard to understanding emergency needs and responder roles.

In another example of compounded vulnerabilities, coordination challenges were multiplied by a predating information shortage. The earthquake revealed that Haiti had little baseline data against which to compare post-quake information (Patrick 2011). For example, Haiti's census data, mostly out-of-date to begin with, was further destroyed or rendered inaccessible due to rubble. Consequently, the international community swiftly commissioned a Rapid Initial Needs Assessment. Yet while data collections were quickly initiated, the results were slow to be published, with this protracted pace caused by differing methodologies and standards among agencies. As a result, much information was outdated by the time of publication, and its potential for long-term strategic planning was constrained by overlapping or differing meth-

odologies. The best, broader needs assessments were regarded to be at the cluster-level with complementary information provided by the World Bank, the European Union, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the UN (Patrick 2011). However, even these reports were limited in their contextual analysis and capacity assessments.

For future crises, greater data coordination should be sought as a priority, not an afterthought. Since Haiti's census data were found to be both out-of-date and inaccessible post-quake, humanitarians might consider extending better support to governmental efforts to gather baseline and census information in nations with alarming development indicators. Areas of synergy between national efforts (which are critical to issues of capacity and leadership) and the work of humanitarians may include technological support to store census or other data, as well as increased involvement of nationals in pre-emergency data collections by NGOs. Increased consideration should be given as to which methodologies best capture critical data and which actors can most effectively conduct information-gathering missions. Valuable studies conducted by Haitian nationals were largely ignored (Grünewald, Binder, and Georges 2010; Patrick 2011; Gleed 2011), not only causing gaps in needs assessment analyses, but also missing a crucial opportunity to build partnerships and coordinate efforts among international and local actors. Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International reports a repeated complaint among focus groups of little Haitian participation, with many feeling that their own initiatives, including censuses of those in impacted areas, loss and damage assessments, and needs assessments, were brushed aside (Gleed 2011).

In addition, the need for standardized definitions for quantifying vulnerabilities was also apparent. The vulnerabilities exhibited by Haiti's population before the earthquake made the challenges of distinguishing between chronic/long-term and acute/short-term assistance needs extremely difficult for humanitarian actors. As explained by Redmond, the major target of humanitarian aid in any emergency is to do "the most good for the most people" (2005: 1320). In order to achieve this goal, aid must be specifically and strategically targeted, a process most successful when needs assessments are carried out rapidly and compared to sound baseline data. In Haiti, responders struggled to identify the populations most in need of emergency assistance, with the IASC noting "the underlying poverty and vulnerability...[rendered] the qualification of 'directly affected by the earthquake' somewhat irrelevant in any case, considering that almost everyone has been affected in some way" (2010: 18). Standardized criteria for distinguishing those most in need of humanitarian assistance must therefore be devised now, with critical re-evaluation given to contexts in which the majority of the population is classified as vulnerable even pre-emergency. Again, any attempts at such standardization are dependent upon the idea that baseline measuring practices should be enacted before a crisis strikes.

The data coordination lessons learned from Haiti primarily revolve around the necessity of standardization, both that of needs assessments methodologies and processes for qualifying the vulnerable. One further need for systemization involves the channels for managing the sheer influx of actors in the immediate post-disaster period. The World Bank notes that charitable donations for disaster relief poured into Haiti at an unprecedented rate, and along with such funding came a plethora of new organizations and ground support (2010). The World Bank reports that the arrival of these new relief agencies often complicated efforts to standardize data collection and operating procedures, as these new actors tended "to prioritize unilateral action over coordination" (2010: 1).

Methods to integrate the efforts of the major recognized, bilateral actors with the new organizations that emerge in the wake of high-profile disasters should be developed now. If a process for standardizing needs assessments and response protocols within the larger humanitarian architecture is devised, coherence will be improved, and responders will minimize the risk of competing strategies. In stressing the importance of speed in the emergency phase, Redmond reminds that too many assessments waste time and frustrate the host communities (2005). He urges smaller agencies to increase the relevance and timeliness of their response by referring to the reports of larger international agencies, and he urges the larger institutions to enable this process by readily sharing data in accessible ways. Meanwhile, Stephenson offers a distinct but perhaps complimentary approach, suggesting that instead of vesting authority in small numbers of organizations in an attempt to achieve coordination through top-down control, modern technology may allow for a reconceptualization of coordination in which relief agencies are regarded as social networks (2005). According to Stephenson, perceiving relief agencies in this way would more easily allow for changes in institutional cultures that encourage operational cooperation across organizational divides.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Just as the factors that produce complex humanitarian emergencies are incredibly intricate and interwoven, so the responses to these crises must be multidimensional and integrated into the specific context. While natural disasters like the Haitian earthquake are always accompanied by a sense of the unexpected, the humanitarian enterprise must not allow itself to be caught off guard. Accordingly, this article has presented three major lessons learned from the Haiti experience: cultivating organizational capacity, fostering strong leadership, and bolstering data coordination. Still, perhaps the most salient verdict of this analysis is that in spite of the unforeseen nature of many emergencies, each of these three lessons learned can further be implemented within humanitarian ranks now. Decisions made today by humanitarian actors, such as whether to invest further in capacity building strategies,

whether to commit to enhancing leadership practices, or whether to reconceptionalize data coordination methodologies and practices, will undoubtedly reap consequences when the next major disaster strikes. The importance of such decisions cannot be overestimated, for as the World Bank noted in the context of Haitian relief, "Every response is either development or counter-developmental; every decision affects everything else" (2010).

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