

**THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE:
A DISASTER SET APART FROM OTHERS?**

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An official at the UN described the Haiti disaster as ‘unusual, almost unprecedented’ because of the ‘devastating effect on local capacity of all kinds and the difficulties of the urban, capital city context’ (Holmes 2010:2). By capacity, he is referring to what disaster management often calls ‘resilience’. When looked at in this way, the Haitian population seems to have very little resilience, but why, and is it as ‘unusual’ as our UN representative seems to think? Haiti’s recent history reveals a country riddled with chronic poverty and rapid, ad-hoc urbanisation, a lethal mixture when then accompanied by a natural hazard such as the earthquake in 2010. On the surface, these are obvious explanations for the scale of the disaster that ensued. The absolute poverty of the majority of the population – GDP was put at 2\$ per capita in 2009 –

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Highlighting Haiti's vulnerability, as we have done above, we notice that the social causation of disasters concentrates firmly on looking inwards, highlighting the impact of human agency, both of individuals and communities, on the outcome of disasters. This emphasis on 'looking inwards' must be understood within the context of wanting to reject the dominant, 'physical causation' theory of disasters (Quarantelli 1998: 15). Though this move should be welcomed, since it helps explain much more about why disasters happen than simply looking at the hazard itself (Twigg 2001a: 1), an exclusive focus on the microphysics of disasters and the power of individual and collective choices means that the bigger, macro-forces of power that a political economic critique sees, for instance, is overlooked. The current social understanding of disasters therefore does not go far or deep enough, I argue, into understanding how these processes, these unsafe conditions, develop

characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard' (Wisner et al. 2004: 11). According to these definitions, there is always a choice to make better decisions, to pull out of self-defeating processes; with better planning, better preparedness, more resilience, closer communities, better foundations, more democracy, more economic diversity, disasters can always be averted. Schilderman and Lyons epitomize this view when they say that:

'Safer homes (will) do little to tackle underlying vulnerabilities...What is actually needed is not just to make houses more resilient, but to make Haitians more resilient too...building back a better Haiti involves rebuilding livelihoods, alongside housing' (2010: 27).

Articles such as this assume that Haiti is disaster-prone because of a lack of resilience, or too much vulnerability. I suggest that a closer look however at the root causes of Haiti's 'vulnerability' reveals a country consistently exploited, diverted and divided by forces too strong to resolve, resist, reject or repel. I argue that Haiti is in fact not *vulnerable* – in as much as it was not bad decisions that caused its structural weaknesses, nor a lack of resilience – but that structural and social weaknesses, mistakenly identified as 'vulnerability' have been imposed onto Haiti. Dependency theory suggests that in order to understand development processes in developing countries, it is necessary first and foremost to look first and understand the development processes and politics that make them possible (Roxborough 1979: 42). In this next section, I propose that, rather than looking at vulnerability in Haiti, let us instead look at the systemic and ideological forces at work in Haiti and thus at the external geo-political and political economic reality that has undermined this country for over two centuries. Going right to the heart of the root causes of Haiti's structural and social weakness, I argue, explains more coherently what differentiates Haiti from other disasters and why this has such serious implications for its long-term recovery. In order to do this, we need to adopt a historical lens, and look into its past to make sense of the patterns of destruction.

not because the scale of the disaster was incomparable with any other in recent history, nor because it was so vulnerable, but because it was not vulnerable in the first place, rather a victim of a much more powerful system that dictated its weakness. This is the *disaster before the disaster, the story behind the story.*

Though we have spoken much of the United States and France, it is important that we do not repeat the same mistakes that we were earlier criticizing of the standard social scientific approach that narrowly

Conclusion: Implications for long-term recovery

Different theories of disaster management reflect prevailing views on the causes, characteristics and consequences of disasters. A 'risk-reduction' approach, that sees the physical hazard as the main causal factor for disasters might try to build better physical defenses, better building foundations. A social vulnerability approach, that sees the choices and dynamics of individuals and communities to be the exacerbating factor, would make better plans, create a more diverse economy, empower communities to work together and improve communications. Whilst neither of these approaches are wrong, by looking *either* inwards *or* outwards, they do not 'see' that both perspectives are needed. This double movement allows us to analyse the structural and ideological causation of disasters that lie in historical, social and economic processes and relationships. This however poses a problem for practical action: how would a country centre a disaster management plan to prepare, respond to and mitigate the dangerous effects of harmful neo-liberal ideology without sounding absurd? As a first step, it is essential, of course, that we take time to understand these processes, as O'Keefe et al. suggested over thirty years ago: '(we must) understand the process by which countries are marginalized to tackle vulnerability...(to) alleviate the causes and not merely the symptoms of disaster' (O'Keefe et al. 1976). Understanding this process is important, but how do we act on it?

Stable and sustainable long-term disaster recovery will need strong leadership from a central government that rejects its history of corruption and focuses not only on immediate recovery, but on a strong Haitian economy that acts in Haitian, not external, interests. Hours after the earthquake hit, the right-wing think-tank *The Heritage Foundation* issued a statement saying 'the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti's long-dysfunctional government and economy'⁹. The structural underpinnings of Haiti's urban poverty – a main exacerbating factor for the Haiti 2010 disaster – are due to the destruction of national production and public services, enforced in part by the International Monetary Fund's

⁹ For a full reference see <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/01/13/things-to-remember-while-helping-haiti/>

(IMF) devastating Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt initiative that enforced

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