Denaturalizing "natural" disasters: Haiti's earthquake and the humanitarian impulse

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Funding: None

Competing interests: None

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Word count: 1,617

A 'natural' disaster?

On January 12, 2010 at 16:53 local time, Haiti experienced a catastrophic 7.0 M_W earthquake 25 km west of the capital, Port-au-Prince. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that more than 220,000 died and 1.3 million were made homeless [1]. This was more than twice as lethal as any previous earthquake of a similar magnitude [2]. The 8.8 M_W earthquake that struck Chile on February 27, 2010 drew further comparisons. Despite the higher magnitude, fewer than 800 died [3].

Why was Haiti so different? Most commentators have pointed to physical factors, such as the shallow epicentre of the earthquake, its proximity to a major population centre, poor building construction, and the lack of an adequate emergency response system [2, 4]. These undoubtedly played a role in the extraordinarily high mortality rate. Although many noted Haiti's poverty and political strife, only a few commentators identified these as key drivers of the level of devastation that the earthquake visited upon Haiti [5, 6]. Even fewer suggested looking further upstream.

What we consider 'natural', we see as outside of our control and not attributable to our actions. I argue for the need to 'denaturalize' such disasters, by examining the historic, political and economic contexts within which such events occur [7]. Specifically, health professionals and policy-makers require an understanding of the unnatural determinants of the problems facing Haiti and how this impacts any form of response. Without this, the 'humanitarian impulse' informing international efforts to support Haiti's long-term recovery and development may serve to merely reinforce the historic relationship between wealthy countries and Haiti, fuelling continued underdevelopment.

Foundations of a disaster

Knowledge of Haiti's history is integral to an informed understanding of the earthquake and its outcome. Only a brief review is possible here, with more detailed accounts available elsewhere [8, 9]. The annihilation of the indigenous peoples began soon after the arrival in 1492 of Spanish colonizers lead by Christopher Columbus, who christened the island Hispaniola. Paul Farmer has

argued that the triple assault of imported disease, malnutrition and maltreatment set a precedent for the subjugation of human life in Haiti at the hands of wealthy nations [8]. Plantations of sugarcane became fields of misery for tens of thousands of trafficked African slaves, while Spanish and French colonizers reaped the profits [10].

The French revolution sparked a revolt of Haiti's middle class and an uprising of its slave majority. In 1804, Haiti became the second independent republic in the hemisphere, after the United States. More importantly, it was the first example of slaves winning nationhood through their own resistance [11].

For this very reason, Haiti was not easily tolerated by European colonial powers or by the slave-owning United States. With its economy ruined by the revolutionary war, Haiti was forced to agree to unfair trading relationships with nations that refused to recognize its sovereignty. Further, in 1825, France sent an armada to retake Haiti, which was only staved off when the young nation agreed to pay 150 million francs as compensation for the loss of the slave trade. This was not paid off by Haiti until 1947 [9]. Similar gunboat diplomacy by the US, Germany and Britain would drain national coffers throughout the 19th century [8].

Foreign interference and political destabilization have continually undermined governance in Haiti. The US has claimed that their occupation of 1915-1934 improved Haitian economic and governance infrastructure [12]. However, contemporary accounts note that the presence of a military force enabled the passing of a constitution that permitted foreign ownership of land [13]. The marines also left behind a well-trained army that went on to rule the country, installing and deposing leader after leader. 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and his son 'Baby Doc' would be the last and most horrific, using *tonton macoutes* death squads to establish their rule between 1957 and 1986. While foreign aid continued to flow to this regime the national debt grew dramatically [14]. Historians agree that these dictators were supported by the West throughout the Cold War under the guise of anti-communism. Supporting this oppressive regime also served the interest of foreign companies who benefited from low-cost Haitian labour [15].

Against significant odds, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected in the nation's first democratic elections in 1990, overwhelmingly supported by the poor and working class. His government was short-lived, as his popular reforms threatened the status quo of Haiti's oligarchs and foreign interests. He was ousted in a coup after only eight months. After years of lobbying the US government, and the intervention of numerous advocates, he was reinstated in 1994. He was re-elected in 2000, only to again be exiled during a coup in 2004. External forces played a role in both instances, leaving Haiti's political health tenuous ever since [8, 16, 17].

The humanitarian impulse

With this background, one can examine the response of the global community to the 2010 earthquake. Many individuals throughout the world generously donated funds, propelled by the 'humanitarian impulse', an innate, visceral urge to help fellow human beings who are suffering [18]. Over $2.4 billion USD in donations poured into international aid agencies [19]. Similar to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the proximity of Haiti to wealthy nations, the size of the devastation and the 'natural' aspect of the disaster, lead to an immediate desire to help by the global community.

The immediate response succeeded in many ways. Many humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international development agencies should be credited with what they accomplished in the face of significant devastation. Numerous rescue attempts were mounted in the immediate aftermath and emergency medical services were operational within hours of the earthquake. In the two months since the disaster, more than 4.3 million people received food assistance and more than 300,000 children and adults were vaccinated to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. As of March 15th, over one million people were receiving daily water rations and over 650,000 had been provided materials for emergency housing [1].

However, some aspects of the post-earthquake response have been problematic, reflecting the history of Haiti's relationship with external actors. Media coverage of the disaster and its response often played into the stereotype of Haiti as a 'cursed nation' [20]. There was scant recognition of the past role of colonial powers in Haiti. The US military assumed leadership for

the humanitarian response almost immediately. They began by coordinating flights at the request of the Haitian government, but their role soon extended to many aspects of the relief efforts. There were examples of medical supply flights being turned away in favour of military flights [21]. Some have argued that too great an emphasis was placed on security, at the expense of relief operations [22]. Others have noted a focus on the protection of private property, which may have detracted from efforts to ensure access to food and water for those in need [23]. Concern about the poor coordination of the response [24] has led some commentators to take issue with the role of NGOs and their agendas [25, 26]. Finally, the focus on the immediate humanitarian response did not consider how the groundwork for future development could be best laid [6]. At the time of writing, there still appears to be no clear plan for addressing long-term concerns, such as economic independence, a political environment free of foreign interference and the removal of a foreign military presence.

Humanitarianism based on actual histories

The humanitarian impulse is too often fitful and fragmented. Furthermore, our involvement in the root causes of such tragedies is rarely examined. The political philosopher, Thomas Pogge, questions simplistic conceptions of injustice, where they are seen primarily as issues of distribution [27]. He adds a relational element. Relational justice seeks to identify the causes of disparities, challenging us to look to the conditions and actions that have created them. In Pogge's reimagining of justice, wealthy nations must address their role in the historic conditions and actions that have lead to such profound global economic disparities. He calls on wealthy nations to recognize their own complicity in the colonial exploitation of human and natural resources, the degradation and oppression of good governance structures within poorer nations, and their support for corrupt and illegitimate regimes [28]. These ‘actual histories’ should replace the more palatable ‘fictional histories’ that attempt to explain away wealthy nations' past contributions to the persistent world poverty [29].

Acknowledging the actual histories that have lead to Haiti's underdevelopment would require wealthy nations to probe our own political, social and economic involvement - proximal and distal, through action or failure to act - in Haiti's underdevelopment. This would also require our

companies and consumers to ask themselves how they have benefited from Haiti's underdevelopment. The answers to these questions need to meaningfully inform humanitarian efforts in Haiti that attend to the upstream conditions that enabled an earthquake to level Port-au-Prince.

1Conclusion

While a laudable 'humanitarian impulse' has driven relief efforts in Haiti, it alone is insufficient to the task. Any lasting efforts to improve life for Haiti's citizens must be informed by an understanding of the disaster's foundational causes. A humanitarian response based on actual histories could resemble the work of NGOs like Partners in Health, which has worked towards just, effective and sustainable humanitarianism in Haiti for years. Even better would be a response that explicitly supported Haitian organizations, civil society and state institutions to lead the rescue and recovery effort [30].

This analysis is certainly applicable beyond Haiti. In numerous countries where humanitarians operate, respecting history and seeing the connection to the present world order is essential to informing action. Ultimately, standing in solidarity means making a long-term commitment to transforming how we relate to Haiti and similar nations around the world.

2Contribution statement

Andrew D. Pinto conceived of this paper, produced the first draft of the manuscript and has approved of the final version. Andrew D. Pinto will act as the guarantor.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Drs. Malika Sharma, Jane Philpott, Katherine Rouleau, Alexandra Mihailovic and Neil Arya for their critical comments and suggestions.

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