

Lunchtime Discussion: Earthquake Response in Haiti

Monday, January 25, 2010, 12:00-1:30 pm
IHRFG Semi-Annual Conference, San Francisco

Facilitator: **John Harvey**, Grantmakers Without borders

Speakers

Blaine Bookey, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti

Walter Riley, Haiti Emergency Relief Fund

Nikhil Aziz, Grassroots International

Bess Rothenberg, AJWS

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John Harvey opened the session by posing the following questions: What is the analysis of the Haiti situation in the past and present? What are the implications on economic, social, political and cultural rights of the Haitian people? And what can funders do? He also mentioned the intersection with the rights of survivors with disabilities and using a human rights framework in responses to the earthquake disaster.

Walter Riley presented an overview of the situation in Haiti and responses to date. He has been working with the Haiti Relief Fund since Aristide was ousted. He interviewed a number of people who suffered from abuses by the Haitian government and the UN forces in Haiti. He addressed the various issues, including women's rights, healthcare, access to clean drinking water, and education. He noted that the world economic crisis forced more Haitian people out of the countryside and into Port-au-prince, causing over population. Additionally, poor labor standards contributed to increasing poverty. People went to work only so that they would have food to take home, not for wages (since wages were sparse). Removal of Aristide left chaos and there was very little that human rights organizations could do to make an impact. The government of Haiti received human rights funding, but it did not reach the people at the grassroots level. There were no relief efforts. Instead, the government paved roads and alleys to show that they were using funds for improvement. Walter also narrated the events of the day of the earthquake.

Blaine Bookey presented background on the human rights situation in Haiti and an overview of the programs of her organization. She noted that Haiti has a history of human rights problems, including in the political realm – there have been no elections since the 1990s. She mentioned that Haiti's prisons are one of the worst detention facilities in North America, violating prisoners' rights. People remain in prison long past their sentences. The prison is a 6 square foot space, nurturing diseases such as tuberculosis, making people on the outside vulnerable as well. She then discussed that the Right to primary education is denied to most Haitians. 90% of the schools are privatized and people cannot afford them. Housing and land rights are also violated. There are a shocking number of deaths in the slums of Port-au-Prince. The right to humanitarian aid is also being violated. She

discussed that her organization is working on how lawyers can provide short and long term solutions during emergency crisis situations.

- They are advocating for the improvement of prison conditions
- Sustainable solution to address detention risk factors
- Education projects and to develop a rule of law for future humanitarian crisis

Nikhil Aziz underscored what Walter said about the earthquake being a national disaster, but stressed that it goes beyond that. He discussed the economic and political implications of US foreign policy on Haiti and France's exploitation of Haiti:

- US foreign policy impacts the response to Haiti's natural disaster.
- Haiti's economic problems began upon its independence from France.
- Haiti is still deeply in debt to France. Human rights violations are compounded by the International Monetary Fund's continuing its policies in conjunction with loans to Haiti (such as freezing of wages).
- Right to food and water is being violated systematically.
- US military very selection about how and where aid is distributed.

He also noted the enormous outpouring from rebuilding and relief organizations. There must be a long-term economic policy to sustain Haiti's farmers. Haiti's farmers are making baseballs and working in sweatshops because they see no future.

Bess Rothenberg: Bess spoke about how human rights funders fit in. She noted the following key points:

- External role: to be mindful of reaching out to educate donors about *effective* funding
- Be on every phone call regarding policy and funding
- Involve Haitians in the process – they should be leading the process

Questions and Answers:

Q: Specifically, where is your money going for those who in Haiti?

WR: Community medical clinics providing first aid, towards purchasing water and food for the local community, medical supplies, we helped a doctor get to a clinic, we have helped nurses get to Haiti, to the Aristide Foundation, to setting up mobile schools with local teachers, to purchase generators for a couple of groups and to support farmers directly as well as to community organizations supporting farmers; to Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, a human right law group. All our support goes to grassroots work.

BR: AJWS is giving to 8 grassroots organizations, 5 in Haiti and 3 in the Dominican Republic. Haitians in the Dominican Republic are well placed to bring in medical supplies, sanitation, and women's hygiene products (overlooked by many large organizations).

NA: Grassroots International is giving to grassroots groups in Haiti and the DR.

Q: What will happen to the prisoners who were in the collapsed prison and court systems? How are public interest groups trying to help rebuild the system?

BB: There is no system in place at the present time. Many prisoners were never charged of the crimes for which they are imprisoned, there are no records kept. There is no system in place to represent the poor.

Q: What is the best way to rebuild Haiti?

BR: Listen to Haitians, involve them, and let them lead their forces.

WR: The US, Canada, and France are making policies behind closed doors, without Haitians. Also, the democratic process must be supported. Right now, the most supported political party in Haiti is not being allowed to participate – this is a big problem.

Q: What is a human rights framework to rebuilding efforts?

BB: Some key human rights concepts to consider are: accountability, transparency, participation, and capacity building. These elements need to be taken into account when programs are being developed. Aid programs should rely on the infrastructure of the local community and use local communities to distribute food and water. There are local organizations that can assist with this process.