

## Haiti: understanding the underwhelming appraisal of the international humanitarian efforts

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Ten years after the earthquake that devastated “the Pearl of the West Indies”, which has become the “NGO Republic” according to some, the authors give us an opportunity to remember, quite simply. But also, and perhaps above all, not to forget the necessary critical analysis of international aid that remains to be done.

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On the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, at 4:43 p.m., a magnitude 7.3 earthquake hit the centre of Haiti, transforming the capital, Port-au-Prince, and the surrounding towns into fields of ruins. The thirty-five-seconds of tremors caused substantial damage that is quite visible today. As a reminder, some 300,000 people were killed, including 60% of the country's civil servants, and just as many were injured amongst the 3.5 million Haitians living in the zones hit. Amongst victims and first responders, the reaction was immediate in the face of pain and chaos. The international response soon followed to tackle the urgent needs of those affected, meaning over 15% of the Haitian population at the time<sup>1</sup>. Despite an obvious lack of coordination between those taking part, the Haitian authorities and the international humanitarian community, access to urgent care and delivery of basic services to fragilised populations was established. In the six months following the catastrophic event, a million people had already benefited from emergency food aid.

### Harsh, well-deserved criticism

Today, we have to admit that the assessment of these ten years since the earthquake appears very mixed: there has been harsh criticism. As a matter of fact, independent assessments have revealed that the substantial provided nevertheless had no long-term effect. The media took a very severe look at the efforts of international aid, which widely contributed to the prevalent cynicism in the academic and political debates regarding Haiti. The Haitian economist Kesner Pharel talks of a “lost decade”, the Haitian militant philosopher James Darbouze<sup>2</sup> has taken up the expression “Haiticide”, and the Haitian director Raoul Peck evokes the “deadly assistance” of the NGOs in his eponymous 2013 documentary. For these intellectuals, if the capital hasn't been rebuilt yet, it is not only due to poor governance by local authorities. The mechanisms at work in international solidarity also bear a large share of the blame.

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<sup>1</sup> Acted, « Haïti : Commémoration des 10 ans du tremblement de terre », 2020, <https://www.acted.org/fr/haiti-commemoration-des-10-ans-du-tremblement-de-terre>

<sup>2</sup> During the commemoration conference on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2010 “Ayiti La”, organised in Montréal.

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Despite humanitarian organisations' tireless work, their results are indeed questionable. In failing to rise to the challenge of a post-earthquake reconstruction, Haiti has spent the last ten years in a severe socio-political crisis that is still paralysing the country<sup>3</sup>, even more violently since 2019, and is hindering the healing process. Haiti has also been the victim of its "popularity." Many individuals and organisations, no doubt full of good intentions, have set up shop in this small accessible country over the following decade, with no mandate or any other reason than "wanting to help"<sup>4</sup>. However, this influx of amateurs has largely drowned out the structural processes of professional organisations. But how can such results be explained despite the ongoing international commitment to Haiti?

### From the "Pearl of the West Indies" to the "NGO Republic"

Before gaining this place in the international spotlight, Haiti was a place of interest mainly for the Catholic Church throughout its history. The repressive Duvalier era, starting at the end of the 1950s, intensified Haitian emigration, the starting point of the spread of a large diaspora throughout the world, including Quebec<sup>5</sup>. This diaspora fought to get their host governments to commit to supporting the development of their home country, with which their social ties were never severed<sup>6</sup>. When President Aristide was overthrown in 2004<sup>7</sup>, the Canadian government, along the same lines as other allied States involved, abstained from having a clear position, up until the discussions regarding the new free trade treaty of 2007. Major powers such as the United States and France had been sharing the governance of the State for several decades, during which time power passed from one Haitian government to the next with great difficulty<sup>8</sup>. It is important to remember that the United States had occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 to protect their strategic economic interests, and that they supported the Duvalier dictatorship for a long time, from 1964 to 1986<sup>9</sup>. This sharing of control between foreign governments and rescue workers was not at work in neutral field in 2010, provoking the resurgence of colonial disputes in Haiti, for which France and the United States bear a large share of the responsibility. At the start of the 2000s, President Préval had shown great discretion during his terms, which sowed the seeds of a consensual vision amongst international politicians, who invested in security and police forces. MINUSTAH was set up in the spring of 2004, comprised of a force of over 9,000 uniformed personnel. In the context of a fragile country, appearing to be supported by the police can seem to have overtones of a form of repression<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> François Audet, « L'ordre et le désordre humanitaire », in Pierre Beaudet et Paul A. Haslam (dir.), *Enjeux et défis du développement international*, Presse de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2014, p. 315-332.

<sup>4</sup> International assistance (NGOs and institutions) were already present before the earthquake. According to Wargny (2011), humanitarian work was already a third of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 [...]. After years supposed to facilitate its development, the Haitian State still depended on international institutions by 60% to balance its regular budget. Christophe Wargny, « Haïti entre Dieu et ONG », *Le Monde diplomatique*, janvier 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Centre d'histoire de Montréal, « La communauté haïtienne à Montréal », Mémoires des Montréalais, 2 juin 2016, <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/la-communaut-haitienne-montreal>

<sup>6</sup> In 1986, at the end of the Duvalier regime, Haitians returned to Haiti to contribute to its development, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> After several months of popular protests and pressure applied by the international community, including France and the United States, President Aristide was forced to leave the country on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February with the help of the US Army. See Bruno Ollivier, « Les médias en difficulté dans la crise en Haïti. La revanche du téléphone portable au pays de l'oralité », *AFRI*, vol. VI, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> This distribution is initiated by a coalition of countries, assembled following Canada's initiative in 2003. See Michel Vastel, « Haïti mise en tutelle par l'ONU ? », *L'actualité*, 15 mars 2003, <https://lactualite.com/monde/haiti-mise-en-tutelle-par-lonu>

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Leblanc, « Pas d'ingérence internationale, réclament des Haïtiens », *Radio-Canada*, 11 novembre 2019, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1384783/haiti-ingerence-internationale-crise-politique-humanitaire>

<sup>10</sup> It is also important to emphasise MINUSTAH's responsibility during the "cholera crisis" a few weeks after the earthquake. The epidemic caused 800 deaths and affected 800,000 people from 2010 to 2013: See Martine Vallo, « L'ONU admet sa responsabilité dans l'épidémie de choléra en Haïti », *Le Monde*, 19 août 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2016/08/19/l-onu-admet-sa-responsabilite-dans-l-epidemie-de-cholera-en-haiti\\_4985249\\_3244.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2016/08/19/l-onu-admet-sa-responsabilite-dans-l-epidemie-de-cholera-en-haiti_4985249_3244.html) and « Choléra en Haïti : l'ONU au banc des

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

When the earthquake hit in 2010, it was “a catastrophe within a catastrophe”. Haiti was already severely weakened and under the tutelage of the main Western powers<sup>11</sup>.

Due to the scope of the event, but also the complexity and fragility of Haiti’s situation, reconstruction turned out to be difficult, and international aid, as well as reconstruction efforts, were less effective. The weakness of the Haitian government at the time warranted the use of international organisations (NGOs in particular) as the main players in reconstruction. This massive influx of international aid, resulting in what some people called the “NGO Republic”, highlighted the Haitian people’s forced-spectator role. This ultimately led to the erosion of local abilities and the weakening of what remained of the embryo of a local economy. We can even observe that many buildings, such as certain hospitals built with government funding and with the help of humanitarian organisations, have become empty shells<sup>12</sup>. The emergency phase never actually gave way to a rehabilitation phase. The term “rehabilitation” also needs to be redefined in the context of fragilised countries. Can we really talk about “*build-back-better*” in this case? The work done by non-governmental organisations remains to this day crucial in answering the daily survival needs of the inhabitants. Which brings us back to the necessary debate about the localisation of aid that aims to encourage the autonomy of the people and the emancipation of local structures.

The majority of the Haitian population, which is young, lives with no real future prospects and is confronted with increasing violence. This frustration amongst young people takes shape in protests against the current government. While many political movements are calling for the Western political powers and their various relief instruments to leave, international solidarity must hear the cry of Haitian civil society to regain the decision-making power that is currently not in the Haitian people’s hands, even if this means a clash of ideas over the coming decades. Another point that the major players in international solidarity must understand is the need to review and improve of the approach to fragile countries, especially if these countries are subject to so-called natural catastrophes, and have close and long-standing relations with the international community. First, consider its fragility with all its complexities and dimensions, territorialise and understand its uniqueness, so as to then evaluate and adapt operational and quality standards to then finally guide, not replace, the development trajectories, working with the government and local partner organisations towards an exit from fragility. Experience has sufficiently shown that Haiti will never be able to rebuild itself from the outside.

*Translated from the French by Alan Holding*

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accusés », *Radio-Canada*, 6 août 2013, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/626408/cholera-haiti-etude-universite-yale-nepal-minustah>

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Holly, « La tutelle », in Andrea Martinez, Pierre Beaudet et Stephen Baranyi (dir.), *Haiti aujourd’hui, Haiti demain : Regards croisés*, Les Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa, 2011, p. 114-127.

<sup>12</sup> Céline Galipeau, « À Haïti, un hôpital neuf... et sans ressources », *Radio-Canada*, 14 septembre 2017, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1055815/hopital-haiti-manque-ressources-financement>

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### Biographies

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