

A development NGO faced with a major emergency in an urban environment

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Before being struck by an unforgettable earthquake, Port-au-Prince was a city. For this very reason it suffered so many deaths, injuries and devastations. The experience of GRET (former Group for Research and Technology Exchanges), as recounted here by Renaud Colombier, provides food for thought about the links that must be forged between development and emergency humanitarian aid actors.

For over 25 years, and well before the 2010 earthquake, Haiti was characterised by chronic political instability. The Haitian government's management capacity was poor, particularly in terms of delivering public services, for want of human and financial resources and political will. Basic services were generally lacking and often provided by the private sector or national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The capital city, Port-au-Prince, had previously expanded in a disorderly fashion. In early 2010, the city's population stood at around 3 million, 50% of whom lived in shanty towns.

In 1995, a French development NGO, GRET, launched a project there to trial a system to facilitate access to drinking water in disadvantaged areas. This project was backed by emergency funding from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO¹), and subsequently taken over by the French Development Agency (AFD).

With the agreement of the public body responsible for drinking water, the Centrale Autonome Métropolitaine d'eau Potable (CAMEP), this involved moving away from tanker-supplied water to a sustainable service consisting of drinking fountains connected to the public water network and managed by local committees with members elected from the local population. By late 2009 this system was serving around fifty districts and one million inhabitants.

In the space of fifteen years, GRET had therefore supported the implementation of a genuine public water policy in disadvantaged districts; of particular note is the institutionalisation of the system through the creation of a unit to coordinate the disadvantaged districts (UCQD) within CAMEP, under the authority of the National Directorate for Water Supply and Sanitation (DINEPA).

The earthquake and the humanitarian response

The 7,3-magnitude earthquake which struck Port-au-Prince on 12 January 2010 had a devastating effect with around 250,000 killed, 300,000 injured, 1,6 million left without shelter, and material losses estimated at 120% of GDP (gross domestic product). Half of GRET's long-established intervention areas were affected by the earthquake.

¹ The former European Community Humanitarian Office is now known as the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.

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Over one thousand NGOs of all sizes and levels of professionalism arrived at the same time. During the emergency response phase, 20% of the NGOs carried out 80% of the work, with the other 80% merely clogging up the system, to summarise the Haitian government's analysis of the situation. At the outset, there was very little coordination with local actors, especially the State, firstly, as they too had been particularly hard-hit by the earthquake, and subsequently because of the emergency teams' intervention methods. The emergency response and international organisations did little to involve local authorities, with the notable exception of UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) which quickly joined forces with DINEPA.

Destroyed and undamaged districts co-existed in a dense urban environment, which gave rise to competition between areas where services were still fee-based and areas where they were provided free-of-charge through international aid. Incidentally, over the first three months, the population in the refugee camps grew from 1,3 to 2 million people thus proving that these camps were a major draw. This seriously disrupted, and at times economically ruined, the local public and private services which were still functioning.

GRET's post-earthquake strategy

GRET's initial challenges were to facilitate access to emergency aid and reconstruction for the disadvantaged districts, support the role of its long-standing public partners in the water sector in this volatile environment, and support the water committees. These committees were frequently bypassed by the emergency response actors and thus lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the population. GRET itself had to be careful to maintain its own legitimacy. Its partners did not understand and criticised GRET for failing to mobilise equal amounts of funding as quickly as the emergency actors, so that they could take action.

However, its intervention policy, to bolster the State by delivering public services, support social cohesiveness in the districts and work towards the social and economic sustainability of its actions, remained unchanged. Such social and economic sustainability meant guaranteeing the continuity of its local actions with a view towards reconstruction and achieving sustainable development in Haiti.

To this end, GRET played a supporting and intermediary role between DINEPA, CAMEP, UCQD, the water committees and some emergency response actors, with the aim of facilitating the introduction of water supply systems (water trucking). GRET therefore had to coordinate these supply systems in the districts, as well as produce and disseminate diagnostic reports in the most disadvantaged districts. It also took part in the "Wash" cluster and the "Beyond Water Trucking" sub-cluster, which was responsible for studying strategies for exiting the emergency interventions and returning to fee-based distribution.

Our NGO carried out two emergency response actions in partnership with its long-standing partners. The first of these, implemented soon after the earthquake, was a cash for work operation in six districts to recapitalise the populations whilst ensuring that any actions were in the common interest (clean-up operations in conjunction with the municipal authorities concerned and the water committees). The second action involved providing strong support for DINEPA and the fifty water committees in order to combat cholera by distributing water purification tablets and raising awareness.

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In April 2010, we re-launched two existing projects and set up eight new ones, mainly at the request of funding bodies, with GRET systematically involving local actors and focusing actions in its areas of expertise.

With regard to reconstruction, deliberations began in January 2010 and resulted in three projects: the first to set up a water quality monitoring centre in the disadvantaged districts; the second to rebuild the disadvantaged districts in Baillergeau and Martissant; and the third, in Saint-Louis-du-Sud, to readjust the balance between the capital and secondary towns.

Although GRET was in great demand, it routinely refused to operate in the camps and, more generally, to implement actions that risked making temporary installations permanent. Unfortunately, this was all too often the case: the shanty town of Canaan, which is now thought to have nearly 300,000 inhabitants in an area that was virtually uninhabited prior to the 2010 earthquake, is a prime example. Located in an isolated area to the north of Port-au-Prince, it started out as a camp and demonstrates the power of attraction generated by the emergency supply of water and basic foodstuffs that were provided there. In contrast to this strategy, GRET consistently campaigned for the on-site reconstruction of destroyed districts.

At the same time, GRET's head office in Paris was presenting a vision of development in this emergency context. It did this by becoming heavily involved in an ad hoc working group set up by Coordination SUD (the French platform for international aid and development NGOs), taking part in meetings with the Interministerial Mission for the Reconstruction of Haiti (MIRH) such as those held by the Haiti collective in France, and by representing European NGOs at the March 2010 Donors' Conference in New York, with a mandate from CONCORD, the European NGO confederation for relief and development.

GRET's interactions with emergency response actors

The position paper drafted for the New York conference reflected the predominant vision of development and a consensus between emergency response and development NGOs. However, this convergence, did not materialise in the field and once in the implementation phase, there were no longer any joint spaces or platforms where NGOs could have discussed reconstruction and outlined their interventions more clearly.

In Haiti itself, the emergency response actors – questioned for a capitalisation work that we conducted – recognised both the GRET's added value in its intermediary role to promote existing structures (public actors, civil society) and its cooperative approach. DINEPA, CAMEP and the UCQD felt that GRET had supported them and offered a unique added value in defending the position of public authorities and the public water service.

Lastly, and after a great deal of misunderstanding at a time when they should have been addressing the populations' requests for emergency aid, the water committees recognised the relevance of GRET's position. Yet all of them pointed out what little impact it was having on emergency practices and exit strategies, except for those of a few francophone NGOs.

Indeed, certain disadvantaged districts received either no or very little aid, and for those that did, the emergency response NGOs rarely went through the water committees to distribute this aid, which was a major factor in the water committees' loss of legitimacy. Even though GRET and the emergency response NGOs tried to work together on several occasions, very few partnerships were forged. Lastly, while GRET's presence in the "Beyond Water Trucking" group

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helped the public authorities oppose exit strategies they deemed dangerous, it did not prevent many of the NGOs who proposed these strategies from ignoring this opposition. It must, however, be acknowledged that from July 2010, certain water committees approached them on behalf of the emergency response NGOs with a view to implementing effective exit strategies.

This limited impact can also be explained by internal factors at GRET: a lack of familiarity with emergency NGOs' strategies and operating methods; insufficient capacity to share and disseminate information; very sporadic involvement – and with no real strategy – in Haiti's platforms of influence and coordination; a lack of human resources suited to emergency response contexts: inability to speak English, no knowledge of the mysteries of UN systems, etc. Other factors relate to the very functioning of emergency actors: fundamental disagreements about intervention philosophy (assistance and free aid versus the search for social and economic sustainability) and relationships with local actors ("bypassing" to intervene rapidly, rather than strengthening and structuring actors as a long-term goal) often hindering cooperation. Competition, the quest for visibility, and operating methods (a rationale based on supply and prefabrication versus a tailor-made response suited to the demand; payment constraints; turnover and team profile; safety constraints) make it difficult for emergency response and development NGOs (and NGOs in general) to work together. In particular, any action influencing the response provided by emergency teams must be taken very quickly, as orders for equipment are placed very soon after rapid needs assessments have been carried out.

Finally, it must be pointed out that DINEPA regretted not equipping itself with the means to optimise GRET's role to guide emergency response NGOs' interventions; without an official mandate and funding GRET's resources and legitimacy to operate with emergency response teams was restricted.

Challenges and lessons learnt

How can we be influential and guide emergency teams' interventions?

The Haiti experience highlights the need for funding bodies and local public authorities to recognise the intermediary and guidance role that locally, well-established development NGOs can play alongside emergency response teams. This recognition must be expressed in a formal mandate with associated funding.

Development actors must have, and make optimal use of, information tools and media that can be disseminated quickly (maps, and information on populations, organisations and networks), and must therefore develop procedures for preventing and reducing risk.

Developing the rapid reaction capacity of development NGOs requires the ability to mobilise funds in an emergency situation and an excellent grasp of decision-making procedures and ad hoc operating processes that must be established upstream. However, it also requires the ability to mobilise external professional resources: commitment to clusters, knowledge of emergency response actors and funding bodies, stress management, psychological support, etc.

Can we make do with providing support or being an intermediary?

Being and promoting our role as an intermediary in an acute emergency response situation, where legitimacy depends mainly on the ability to take action and intervene rapidly and directly with the population, is difficult. There is some rivalry and competition in terms of visibility between NGOs and institutions, which ultimately means that the risk of marginalisation cannot

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be ruled out. An official GRET mandate on behalf of DINEPA to foster links between emergency actors and water committees would certainly have produced more results.

But this experience also taught us that this one stance would have been insufficient to promote other ways of doing things and to make local actors visible. In addition to their anticipated effects, the emergency or post-emergency actions carried out by GRET in Haiti will have been useful on three levels: maintaining GRET's legitimacy in the eyes of the water committees and public authorities, particularly during the "cholera crisis"; helping to maintain the legitimacy of the water committees in the eyes of the population; and building relations with new funding bodies and subsequently negotiating funding for development actions.

The fact remains that these were limited, one-off actions, although it is true to say that the specific constraints associated with emergency response funding are not conducive to the construction of new strategies from scratch. GRET's capacity to instil its intervention philosophy in its emergency response actions or in projects financed by funding bodies from their emergency funds would no doubt have been reduced if it had needed to implement larger-scale actions. GRET's experience in this crisis in Haiti demonstrates the need to make a well-reasoned choice of which opportunities to seize in an emergency situation. It also shows that it is possible to carry out emergency response actions in partnership with local actors and by involving them in medium and long-term plans.

How can we integrate emergency response into development actions, and development into emergency response?

In countries such as Haiti, which are regularly subject to major natural risks, having a development vision means incorporating the issue of emergency response. Development NGOs could anticipate emergency response situations by:

- developing risk-prevention approaches that are an integral part of projects;
- helping to draw up contingency plans with public authorities (local and national) in the countries exposed to natural risks and helping their local partners to be part of that process;
- working on the availability of the information gathered by development teams so that this information can be mobilised in emergency response situations.

Development and emergency response NGOs should also try to develop relationships and partnerships to improve the way in which their interventions are coordinated. They must learn how to get to know each other better and create platforms for reflection and dialogue on how to coordinate and collaborate. It would also be in their interests to establish relationships between their head offices and local representatives (where they exist) in a non-crisis environment; these relationships could then be mobilised immediately when necessary.

Lastly, development NGOs should adopt an advocacy and communication strategy with their funding bodies and emergency response NGOs, and organise specialist training courses for emergency response professionals. This would promote and secure recognition for their roles and intervention methods in emergency contexts. These thoughts have been prompted by the fact that urban environments are facing a growing number of threats, and that development NGOs are increasingly present in these environments.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

Biography • Renaud Colombier

An economist and urban planner, Renaud Colombier has been Urban Development and Housing Programme Manager at GRET since 2011, where he supervises and supports integrated development projects in the poorer parts of Haiti, Congo-Brazzaville, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Myanmar. He also serves as an expert for studies and project ownership support missions for local authorities in French overseas departments (French Guiana and Mayotte in particular) in the fields of preventing and curbing informal settlement and strategic urban planning.

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