

# Rebuild Haiti, Not Just Its Capital

ROBERT MAGUIRE

“Building Haiti back better,” a phrase coined by Bill Clinton, became a mantra after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck the country’s capital, Port-au-Prince, and nearby areas on January 12, 2010. The earthquake killed 300,000 Haitians and injured an equal number. It left 1.5 million people homeless. It destroyed or severely damaged 313,000 buildings—including homes, hospitals, schools, churches, businesses, and most government ministries. United Nations officials estimated the economic damage at \$7.8 billion, or about 120 percent of the country’s annual GDP.

By emphasizing building back all of Haiti, and not just the quake-struck capital, Clinton, the former US president and current UN special envoy to Haiti, underscored an important point: Notwithstanding the enormous devastation in the quake zone, post-earthquake reconstruction provides an opportunity to focus on the needs of the entire country, not just one part of it.

## TWO REPUBLICS

For decades Haitians have described their nation as composed of two distinct republics: “the Republic of Port-au-Prince” and the rest of the country. The difference between the two is stark. The former is the center of attention, services, decision making, investment, and the accumulation of wealth and power. The latter is an ignored, impotent, and impoverished backwater. Haiti’s secondary cities have more in common with the neglected countryside than they do with Port-au-Prince.

With education, health care, jobs, and infrastructure concentrated in the capital, some 75,000 rural emigrants have flooded Port-au-Prince annually in recent decades. As a result, the metropolitan area grew from about 575,000 in 1975 to more than 3 million—roughly one-third of the country’s population—just before the earthquake.

Over time, poor people seeking opportunities in the capital have piled on top of each other in precarious locations—coastal mudflats, river flood plains, ravines, and steep hillsides—creating vast slums around and within the increasingly dilapidated city. Despite desperate conditions and unfulfilled promises, however, the poor have found Port-au-Prince better than the alternatives. In 2008, 56 percent of all Haitians earned less than \$1 a day; in rural areas, where 55 to 60 percent of all Haitians live, the figure was 69 percent.

The idea of building all of Haiti better was already an issue before the earthquake. In both 2007 and 2009, the government’s poverty alleviation and economic growth plans, endorsed by international donors, called for addressing the country’s social and economic imbalance through the decentralization of investment in education, health care, and infrastructure, as well as the rehabilitation of the natural environment and the productive capacity of the long-neglected traditional agrarian economy. (According to data collected by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, only 7 percent of donor allocations between 1995 and 2006 had gone toward agriculture. In 2007, this figure had dropped to 2 percent, or \$12 million out of \$624 million in donor support.)

The Haitian government’s post-quake action plan for recovery and growth reemphasized these points, calling for decentralization to address the “unbalanced distribution of economic activity, with over 65 percent of economic activity and 85 percent of fiscal revenue concentrated in Port-au-Prince.”

This plan, which calls for the creation of agricultural, manufacturing, and tourism “growth poles” beyond the capital, was enthusiastically endorsed by international donors, who pledged close to \$10 billion over five years at a March 2010 donors’ conference at the UN. US officials, in supporting the plan, identified a series of “development corridors” linked to the growth poles. The

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outcome of these ambitious plans will have to be assessed years from now. However, early indications show how difficult it will be to address the geographic, social, and economic imbalances that severely hinder Haiti's development.

## MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Immediately after the earthquake, approximately one-fifth of the capital's pre-quake population—some 600,000 residents—fled the devastated city for towns and villages unaffected by the quake. Most went to places where they had family. This de facto demographic decentralization provided an opportunity to begin addressing the Port-au-Prince/rest-of-Haiti imbalance through immediate investment in infrastructure and opportunities to assist the displaced. Indeed, within weeks of the earthquake, Haitian officials called for assistance to be provided to 200 decentralized communities; the exodus presented both a need and an opportunity to put people to work rehabilitating the country's damaged landscape and agricultural infrastructure.

With practically all international attention focused on Port-au-Prince since the quake, however, little of that investment has materialized. Within months of the disaster, reports surfaced of ennui among the displaced, and of farm families cooking the seeds they had set aside for the next planting season in order to feed people they had taken in.

The government, Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive confided to me last summer, mobilized its meager resources toward rural areas (and hence appeared largely absent in Port-au-Prince humanitarian relief operations) after failing to persuade better-endowed nongovernmental organizations to branch out from the capital. NGOs, with whom the government competes—mostly unsuccessfully—for financial and human resources, prefer to be in Port-au-Prince, where they get more attention, the prime minister remarked sardonically.

With thoughts of reinforcing Haiti's rural communities coming to naught, it was no surprise that by late summer waves of those who had fled the city returned to it, some reportedly bringing new migrants with them. They were pushed by neglect and attracted by the assistance provided to those who had remained in the "Republic" of Port-au-Prince.

A devastating cholera outbreak in late 2010, which began not in the earthquake zone but north of it in the Artibonite Valley, once again underscored both the disproportionate attention given to Port-au-Prince and the neglect suffered by the rest of Haiti. Health workers active in the valley, where little clean water was available, had been warning of such a calamity erupting away from the capital, where disease-prevention efforts and distribution of clean water have been an essential part of post-earthquake humanitarian operations.

## STILL A CHANCE

The goal of building back a better Haiti in the post-earthquake period, elusive thus far, still might be achieved. For that to happen, however, the mind-set that focuses so much attention and so many resources on Port-au-Prince will have to change. Investment in productive infrastructure, potential growth poles, and complementary development corridors—roads, ports, electricity, housing—must be robust and sustained. Investment in human resources, through improved educational and health care opportunities, as well as increased access to investment credit by entrepreneurs, is also essential. Efforts must be coordinated, with the Haitian government taking the lead.

The man who coined the phrase "building Haiti back better" is now cochair (along with Haiti's prime minister) of the Interim Haitian Recovery Commission (IHRC), a mechanism for approving and coordinating post-quake recovery projects. The IHRC has begun to approve proposals that will extend Haiti's recovery beyond Port-au-Prince. Among such measures are support for the extension of educational infrastructure, construction of a teaching hospital in the country's heartland, and increased services and investments that target small and medium-sized business enterprises, including ones beyond Port-au-Prince.

Donors are funding road construction in support of the growth poles, and foreign investors have begun to show interest in establishing factories there. Much work remains to be undertaken and sustained, however, if the two republics are to become one and if Haiti is to be built back better. ■

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