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Haiti on shaky road to recovery

by Alice Popovici



On Jan. 10, Partners in Health's cofounder, Dr. Paul Farmer, plants the first palm tree during the inauguration of a national teaching hospital in Mirebalais, north of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. (AP photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

More than two years after a massive earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, Haiti, much of the capital city remains in shambles, with nearly 500,000 people still living under tarps, a lack of clean water and the looming threat of disease, leaving some to wonder what was done with the relief money funneled through countless organizations that operate in the impoverished Caribbean nation.

Among those calling for accountability and better oversight of nongovernmental organizations is filmmaker Michele Mitchell, who wanted to find out what happened to \$1.4 billion Americans donated after the earthquake. Her documentary, "Haiti: Where Did the Money Go?", which has been airing on PBS stations across the country, shows the dire poverty of people still living in relief camps and points to a lack of transparency in the work of some nongovernmental organizations. Similarly, the BBC World Service, in a recent podcast series titled "The Truth about NGOs," talks about Haiti with nongovernmental workers and critics, who say good work has been done, but also that resources have

been wasted because of poor coordination.

To those who were working in Haiti long before the earthquake, the criticism is nothing new.

“In this catastrophe, a lot of the complaints about NGOs and humanitarian relief are no different than what’s been said about NGOs all along,” said Henry Carey, a Georgia State University political science professor who has been traveling to Haiti to work with various organizations for the past 30 years. “Some are helping, some are hurting.”

Carey and others familiar with Haiti’s history of chaos and political dysfunction agree that the country needs to build state structure and start providing services to its citizens, who now depend on nongovernmental and faith-based organizations for health care, education and other needs. How to do this effectively is still unclear, but many now working on infrastructure projects are optimistic that they are laying the groundwork for a more solid future.

Eduardo Almeida, Haiti representative for the Inter-American Development Bank, said his organization is working with the Haitian government to rebuild not only what was lost in the earthquake, but to build a better framework in the areas of transportation, education, sanitation, agriculture and the private sector. The organization has allocated a \$2.2 billion grant for reconstruction work in Haiti through 2020.

The organization is working on three large-scale projects, among others:

- Drawing tourism inland from the northern coastal port of Labadie, where cruise ships frequently dock, by renovating a historic monument site and building the road to reach it;
- An industrial park expected to bring about 80,000 jobs to the north of Haiti (40,000 inside the park and 40,000 outside), with employers that will include South Korean garment and broadband cable manufacturers and a Swiss furniture manufacturer;
- Increasing the production of 60,000 small-scale farmers in the north of Haiti by giving them vouchers for machinery, seeds and technology, and linking them to markets.

“The idea is to decentralize the economy from Port-au-Prince” as well as “to build the capabilities of the [government] ministries,” and this will take time, Almeida said. “It’s not only building infrastructure, but it’s building the capability of the government to reconstruct.”

Partners in Health, an organization that has been developing community-based health care in Haiti since the 1980s along with its Haitian counterpart, Zanmi Lasante (“partners in health” in Haitian Creole) has been working with the Ministry of Health in the day-to-day operation of a dozen health care facilities throughout the country. This year they plan to open a 320-bed public teaching hospital they have been building in Mirebalais, about 30 miles outside of Port-au-Prince.

“Our whole philosophy is helping to build the public health system,” said Cate Oswald, Partners in Health’s program director in Haiti, “so that one day, when the ministry is stronger, they’ll be able to take these facilities on.”

Mirebalais Hospital will include the first CT-scanning machine in Haiti’s public health system; women’s and neonatal services; and a comprehensive nutrition program. It is “a culmination of building different levels of the public health system,” Oswald said. “Our philosophy is that every person deserves the highest standard of health care free of charge.”

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In Port-au-Prince, Catholic Relief Services is working with the Ministry of Health and several medical institutions on rebuilding the historic St. Francois de Sales Hospital destroyed in the earthquake into a 200-bed, state-of-the-art teaching hospital, with a groundbreaking ceremony planned for later this spring.

"This particular hospital, its mission is to serve the poor of Port-au-Prince," said Annemarie Reilly, CRS vice president of overseas operations. "It's very much an effort to support local institutions."

The hospital is expected to be completed within two years.

Archbishop Bernardito Auza, apostolic nuncio to Haiti, said the Catholic church lost many of its buildings in the earthquake, including two cathedrals, dozens of parish churches, and countless religious houses and schools. Many other structures were severely damaged.

"The earthquake did not bring misery and poverty to Haiti; it only exacerbated an already difficult situation, in which problems are profound and require long-term solutions if reconstruction could be meaningful," Auza wrote in an email to *NCR*.

Auza said the church has been making technical preparations to rebuild the structures so they will withstand future natural disasters, and has just bought the land where it will rebuild the philosophy and theology schools of Haiti's National Major Seminary in Port-au-Prince. Both sets of buildings collapsed during the earthquake.

Sr. Rita Larivee, general superior for the Sisters of St. Anne and a former *NCR* publisher, travels to Haiti frequently to visit the 12 traditional schools and a couple of education projects her congregation runs throughout the country. She said education is important in Haiti because children are "their hope as a country."

But -- for a variety of reasons stemming from severe poverty -- many children do not go to school, Larivee said. It could be that the child's parents cannot afford the cost of the schoolbooks and the mandatory uniform, which comes to at least \$100 per year, or that the child's community has only a primary school, or simply that there is no school in the community.

In one such area, Larivee said, about 100 children gather regularly for lessons under a makeshift structure made up of four posts and a roof the sisters set up in the middle of a vast field.

In Port-au-Prince, where all five of the congregation's schools were destroyed or badly damaged, the sisters have been rebuilding with the help of seismic engineers and architects, ensuring the new schools will be "earthquake solid," Larivee said. They just reopened one school, and are working with the Taiwan-based Tzu Chi Foundation on rebuilding the 1,600-student College Marie-Anne, which since the earthquake has been operating in temporary structures resembling airplane hangars. The foundation is providing the approximately \$5 million it will take to rebuild the school.

Despite Haiti's challenges, Larivee said she is optimistic that the country's young people will be able to turn things around in the next couple of decades.

"Many people ask me: Do I see hope? And I say I have hope in the next generation," Larivee said. "You give them another 20 years, you give them a quality education."

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