

Build back better: Haiti's future

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The initial humanitarian response to the January 12 earthquake in Haiti has been impressive. Within weeks, Americans pledged over \$500 million to the relief effort, almost equaling their response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. It's been estimated that half of all American families have donated to Haiti relief.

For all the outpouring of money from around the world and the heroic effort of aid workers, relief efforts remain hampered by Haiti's weak governmental structures and inadequate social services. Supplying basic food, shelter and medical aid is still a challenge, especially in rural areas. Perhaps a third of the displaced people are still waiting to receive plastic sheeting so they can construct a temporary home. Meanwhile, relief workers worry that the camps that have been created for displaced people will soon breed disease and violence. Even worse is the prospect that these refugee camps will become permanent slums for half a million people.

Haiti has long been known as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The history of Haiti seems to be: whenever you think it can't get worse, it does. Prior to the earthquake, half of all Haitians lived on \$1 per day and most could not afford basic food and clothing. According to the Overseas Development Institute, nearly three out of every four households relied on the money sent home by relatives living outside the country.

Haiti has also been known as the country with the most nongovernmental organizations per capita in the hemisphere. That fact certainly reflects the extent of need in the country, but it also points to one of the dismal ironies of relief work: while an NGO may succeed in meeting immediate needs, it may also create and reinforce the recipients' dependency on outside help and not fundamentally alter their prospects.

"Build back better" has become the slogan of those who know this history and look to address Haiti's long-term needs. "Better" means creating sustainable jobs and enlisting Haitians in their own development so that donors are not creating new dependencies.

Part of that rebuilding involves reviving Haiti's agriculture (see Paul Jeffrey's [article](#) in this issue). Roger Thurow, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who specializes in development issues, notes that for decades international donors encouraged countries like Haiti to reduce their investment in agriculture and instead focus on developing a manufacturing sector, so it could supposedly take advantage of offering low-wage labor on the international market. Astonishingly, a country with one of the world's highest rates of hunger and malnutrition was encouraged to stop growing rice.

In the years ahead Haiti will need sustained investments from governments, businesses and the nonprofit sector, including churches. All who partner in rebuilding Haiti must ask whether they are indeed building back better. Is the project they work on one that Haitians can sustain and one to which Haitians themselves are committed? Does it create viable jobs? Does the agricultural aid accommodate local knowledge and practice? Will residents be able to maintain a new water purification system—or other technical improvements—after the donors go home?