

# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

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## NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

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GRACE EVEREST, OCT 5 2011

Since the catastrophic earthquake hit Haiti on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2010, the development sector has been engaged in vigorous debate concerning the failures of the NGO response to its disastrous situation. With reconstruction efforts still not underway, critics have highlighted the gap between the generous assistance promised by the international community and the pledges honoured so far. A number of evaluative reports have cited problems such as a lack of coordination and cooperation between NGOs and the failure of many NGOs to provide data and information on project expenditure (DAP 2010, p.6), among other issues. What becomes clear upon examination of Haiti's situation in the wake of the earthquake though, is that the perceived 'crisis of humanitarianism' to emerge, cannot be analysed in a vacuum. As Husson et al. have recognised, 'every crisis has a history' (1999, p.11). Taking inspiration from their argument that in approaching crises, 'interaction is necessary between the factual and the structural, between actors and systems, between the short and the long-term, and between the local and the global levels' (1999, p.12), my analysis will seek to embed the current crisis of the Haitian state and society within its broader socio-political context, and in particular examine the role Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played in its pattern of underdevelopment.

As the US Institute of Peace have acknowledged in a recently issued policy brief entitled 'Haiti: A Republic of NGOs' (2010), concerns about the overwhelming role played by humanitarian organisations in Haiti's unstable society are deep rooted, and indeed, the unprecedented havoc wrought in the wake of the earthquake can be seen as a direct product of the long-term failures of state development in Haiti. The reality of Haiti's weak infrastructure and the inability of its institutions to deal with disaster is brought home to us by the fact that recent earthquakes in Chile and Japan measured far higher on the Richter scale, and yet Haiti's earthquake claimed a markedly higher death toll of 230,000 lives, left 1.5 million people homeless, and has been described as the 'largest emergency response in the 40-year history of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)' (2011, p.2). While the natural disaster of earthquakes cannot be prevented, Haiti's acute vulnerability to them can be described as entirely man-made. Unable to implement the lessons of 'life saving' housing perfected by earthquake engineers in the rich North, the rapidly growing urban sprawl of Port-au-Prince, situated in a severely degraded environment and home to the 'modern mega-slum' of Cité Soleil (Davis 2006, p.92), is characterised by overpopulated poverty and thus ad hoc and inadequate construction; features which sit at the root of Haiti's distinctive susceptibility to crises, and all problems which are traceable to broader developmental issues ravaging the country long-term. Considering Haiti is purported to have in operation more NGOs per capita than any other country in the world (Kristoff and Panarelli 2010, p.1), providing 70 percent of healthcare in rural areas and 80 percent of public services (Dupuy 2010, p.1), it must be asked what measure of responsibility falls upon these NGO actors in perpetuating Haiti's vicious cycle of 'crisis'.

Drawing upon a mixture of theoretical and empirical materials, this essay will argue that NGOs in Haiti have worked to undermine the symbiotic nature of the social contract between the Haitian state and its citizens. I will take as my point of departure the underlying thesis that Haiti has mistakenly been looked upon as a blip on the horizon of an otherwise perfectly functioning global capitalist world order. As a consequence, its continual chain of crises have been misleadingly conceptualised as isolated incidents of 'humanitarian emergency': an approach which has failed to acknowledge the role of the international community in contributing to Haiti's suffering, and in so doing, created what one journalist has termed 'the most dependent independent nation in the world' (O'Connor 2011, p.1). Building upon this theoretical premise, my argument will continue on to explore the extent to which NGOs in Haiti have been operating as a 'nongovernmental government' in two different senses: Both in their creation of a parallel system of

# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

governance which avoids and thus undermines the Haitian state, and in terms of the close connections between NGOs and external governments, in particular the US, which have a long history of intervention in Haiti. Linked in with the stifling of state power, I will go on to consider the ways in which NGOs have simultaneously suppressed the evolution of Haitian civil society. In mounting this argument it will be proposed that NGO actors have been caught in what I visualise as an 'aid worker bubble' which shuts out the average Haitian citizen, thus sapping local capacity rather than building upon it. The discussion will conclude with a case study of the NGO 'Partners In Health', which, as one of the few success stories to come out of NGO involvement in Haiti, will be considered in the light of certain theories within the literature on the role of NGOs in world politics. By completing my argument with a positive example of NGO intervention in Haiti, I hope to express that the role of NGOs is not 'all bad', and that the problematic patterns drawn attention to are not necessarily the product of a conscious stance on their part, but are certainly ones which point towards the absolute necessity of a reassessment of their interactions with fragile states.

## The Illusion of Emergency

*'It is an illusion that we think of emergencies as completely unpredictable and essentially short term.'* (Calhoun 2010, p.1).

Upon seizing independence in the world's first slave revolution of 1804, Haitians were among the few in the Caribbean region to resist the restoration of a plantation economy which had oppressed them for so long. Fatton describes how after throwing off the chains of imperial domination, people 'simply wanted to own some land and subsist independently on it' (2006, p.120). Yet the dreams of an agrarian egalitarianism harboured by the Haitian people in this period still have not come to fruition in 2011. Instead, Haiti is today totally reliant on imported food, its agricultural sector has been utterly neglected, and just prior to the earthquake 3.3 million Haitians were reported dependent on food aid (Crisis Group 2009, p.7), a number which has surely only risen to new heights in its aftermath.

After years of control under a French colonial administration which set in place a predatory hierarchy of racial and class tensions, or what Fatton terms an 'authoritarian habitus' (2006, p.118), Haiti along with many other areas of the Caribbean and Latin America was drawn ineluctably into the 'backyard' of another country; this time that of the United States. Arguably, from this point onwards Haiti has never escaped from the clutch of US hegemonic power. Initially diplomatically isolated from its neighbour, Haiti soon became an instrument of US Cold War politics, with the notoriously violent Duvalier dictatorship propped up throughout by USAID funds; in his first and bloodiest years in power 'Papa Doc' Duvalier received outright gifts from Washington, and even 'took to appropriating USAID trucks to haul peasants to his rallies' (Farmer 1994, p.108). Farmer has made the poignant observation that 'in a sense, Papa Doc was a terrible Latin American reflection of the Cold War, which has always had the Third World as its hottest battlefield' (1994, p.109). Once the Duvalier dynasty had ceased to serve the interests of the US during the second phase of its anti-communist crusade in the 1980's, Haiti became a victim of what Hoogvelt refers to as the 'post-imperial period of debt peonage' (1999, p.49). Ironically, this period of Haitian external intervention saw the IMF/World Bank/USAID nexus unleash its universalist structural adjustment programs in the name of 'democracy', with their neoliberal worldview able to 'lay down the parameters of what could be done and even what could be thought..' (Payne and Sutton 1993, p.18). Contrary to the hopeful first phase of post-colonialism then, the history of Haiti, right up to its current record-breaking population of international NGOs, has been defined by an extreme external orientation remarkably akin to the 'peripheral economy society' conceptualised by world system theorists (Wallerstein 1974, Hoogvelt 2001, p.39). In essence, Haiti's story is one of outside interference which, in collaboration with its corrupt domestic elite, has worked to produce the fragile state currently in existence.

Once one situates the unprecedented impact of the earthquake upon Haitian society within this history of exploitation and dependency, the labeling of Haiti's current crisis as an unpredictable 'emergency', an 'act of god', becomes questionable. In his enlightening portrayal of Haitian politics, Farmer discusses how Haiti has long been depicted in prevailing commentary as isolated and disconnected, 'a static country of backward peasants' (1994, p.54), when in fact, 'Haiti must be understood as a quintessentially Western entity' (1994, p.56). At this point it is useful to refer to Craig Calhoun's discussion of the origin of the term 'emergency', which he notes gained currency in the 1980's, 'becoming a sort of counterpoint to the idea of the global order. Things usually worked well, it was implied, but occasionally went wrong' (2008, p.85). In reacting pragmatically and providing new tents for every individual

# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

'emergency' Haiti suffers, NGOs imply just this; that Haiti is an isolated backwater, an anomaly of the global order from which NGOs originate; and thus omit from the picture their part in maintaining Haiti's peripheral position. Indeed, Calhoun directly criticises the cosmopolitan stance of humanitarian organisations like MSF: 'Doctors without Borders' (operating in Haiti) which take on a 'distanced view of the global system, a view from nowhere or an impossible everywhere that encourages misrecognition of the actual social locations from which distant troubles appear as emergencies' (2008, p.86). Underpinning the more specific ways in which NGOs have undermined the contract between the state and society in Haiti then, it seems NGOs have stifled change by mistakenly taking emergencies in Haiti to be temporary interruptions of the development process, causing long-term dependence and weakening the capacity of the local population.

Perhaps the major reason NGOs have been seemingly blind to the long-term effects of their humanitarian aid in Haiti, is that most underestimate the extent to which they are part and parcel of what Young has termed the 'liberal project' (1995). Young disputes the 'liberal myth' of civil society organisations like NGOs, which he points out ignores the fact of their flourishing along with the new world order, and far from being autonomous were 'heavily shaped and regulated by legal norms buttressed by state power' (1995, p.535). The extent to which NGOs have adopted a universalist standpoint in relation to Haiti, one which is rooted in a 'view from nowhere' in abstraction from the concrete characteristics of human communities (Young 1995, p.528), is exposed by the angry reflections of a Haitian advisor to the UN; "every day I go to meetings, I'm the only Haitian there, and I have to tell them, 'Your perception is not right.' I feel that it is a lost battle." Haitians have their own systems of survival, she said, but instead of tapping into that creativity, aid groups come in thinking the country is a "clean slate" (O'Connor 2011, p.1). This statement is striking in its similarity to Pouligny's damning critique of the 'liberal messianism' of NGOs who 'falsely behave as though the date of their arrival was year zero for the country, as though nothing had happened before them' (2005, p.502).

## Nongovernmental Government

### 1. Bypassing the Haitian State

The first major barrier between the Haitian state and its citizens, has been the impact of what has become known as the 'reverse aid agenda' (Hoogvelt 2001, p.192). Championed by major donors such as the World Bank, this agenda has seen the redirection of aid away from national governments once presumed to be the engine of growth, towards so-called 'bottom-up' approaches whereby aid is delivered via private 'civil' organisations such as NGOs. As a result, the Haitian state which had already been subsumed by the emerging culture of appealing for foreign aid for any kind of expenditure or project (Young 1995, p.540), has withered away into a 'hollowed out contract manager' (Bolton 2011, p.13), providing none of the protection expected of it.

Attempts to offset the democratic deficit of this process by bringing NGOs under the control of a transparent, coordinating 'cluster system' made up of groupings of UN agencies, NGOs and other international organisations, seem only to have formalised the hollowing out of the state. Drawing upon his own observations of post-earthquake Haiti, Bolton describes how this mechanism has become a kind of 'para-parliament' which debates and discusses policy in the absence of clear governmental leadership from the Haitian parliament, and yet without the consent of the people (2011, p.13). The existence of an NGO para-parliament creates what Brinkerhoff's analysis calls the 'two-track problem' of service delivery and public sector capacity building, whereby the 'two tracks of NGOs and government have fundamentally different strategies and time frames' (2010, p.70), meaning that when NGO staff exit the country projects have no further viability. The NGO 'Merlin' have released an evaluative report highlighting the repercussions of this two-track approach for the Haitian health sector, where the international response has 'failed to support existing health capacity, staging a 'take-over' and undermining Haiti's ability to respond and coordinate. The longer term implications for Haiti's health system are only now coming to light...' (Merlin 2010, p.3).

Bolton's description of a 'para-parliament' as being manifest in the cluster system in Haiti, can be linked in with Duffield's theory of 'strategic complexes of global governance' (2002, p.45). While Duffield's thesis is concerned primarily with global governance formed in response to the 'new wars' of Africa, the new public policy of privatization and internationalization he describes is epitomised in Haitian society. Just like Duffield's vision, political authority in

# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

Haiti is a multi-leveled affair which has moved beyond the nation-state ideal, resulting in precisely what his writing predicts; the inability of the state to act alone, and the compromising of the state's ability to protect its citizens (2002, p.49). The problem this creates for the wellbeing of the Haitian people, is that while NGOs in unison with other international actors have taken on a 'gap filler' role in the absence of a strong state, these private, foreign organisations lack the representative function and thus the accountability and legitimacy to effectively serve the people long-term; a role which can ultimately only be fulfilled by a state motivated by a thriving social contract. Indeed, Bolton remarks that, 'NGOs in Haiti derive their legitimacy and power from agencies' ability to raise funds, usually from outside the country, rather than from any social contract with the local people' (2011, p.17). Schuller too has noted that 'NGOs are not beholden to the same logic of public, civic responsibility' as the state (2009, p.89). At the heart of democracy is accountability, a feature which is eroded by such an overwhelming presence of NGOs. Therefore, contrary to the original intentions of these organisations it seems their activism has in fact acted as a hindrance to the development of a strong culture of democracy within Haiti.

While bypassing the state may have made sense under the Duvalier dictatorship, for the past twenty years, this tendency has significantly weakened the state's ability to interact with its citizens. For NGOs, it seems that the legacy of the Duvalier dictatorship and the torrent of human rights abuses perpetrated under the regime have locked the Haitian state into its reputation as an 'international pariah', justifying its being bypassed and essentially ignored; thus restricting the opportunity for new governments of Haiti to prove they can transform the nature of the relationship with their citizens. In 1999 for instance, international donors officially withdrew all funds from the Haitian state as well as from the UN mission, and channeled them through NGOs (Zanotti 2010, p.759), and it seems this lack of trust in Haitian-run institutions has lingered on. As Macrae has recognised, an aid approach which fails to operate through the state breaches the traditional idea that accountability of aid rests upon the recipient state sanctioning and monitoring aid flows (1999, p.xv). Apart from violating accepted codes of humanitarian conduct, on a political level this approach undermines the Keynesian social welfare state ethos and social contract that states are, or should be, responsible for service provision (Schuller 2009, p.86). In this sense, NGOs could actually be exacerbating incentives for the corrupt behavior of state officials by 'letting them off the hook', and allowing them to shirk their governmental responsibilities. The damaging absence of an integral state in Haiti is evident in people's anger at the failure of the government to fulfill simple duties such as rubbish cleanup; 'to many, the piles of trash were highly visible signs of state failure', with one citizen remarking, "There isn't a government *at all*" (Schuller 2009, p.88). Since last year's earthquake, with global governance having been 'turbo-charged' (Bolton 2011, p.13), the long term avoidance of the Haitian state by NGOs seems only to have heightened. This problem is addressed by Doucet in a recent article entitled 'NGOs Have Failed Haiti', in which she describes how twelve Haitian members of the 'Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission' (IHRC) presented a letter of protest to co-chairman Bill Clinton, arguing that the Haitian state has come to function only as a 'rubber stamp'. Doucet writes:

"They complain of being "completely disconnected from the activities of the IHRC," given no background information on the projects they are supposed to fund, given "time neither to read, nor analyze, nor understand—and much less respond intelligently—to projects submitted" the day before they're voted on. There is no follow up on previously approved millions in funds; they "don't even know the names of the consultants who work for the IHRC nor their respective tasks." (2011, p.1).

Many parallels can be drawn here between Haiti's fragile state and that of East Timor; another country which has been harshly subjected to the shortcomings of international aid agencies. In the late 1990's, East Timor had much of its infrastructure destroyed by the departing Indonesian military, severely damaging key sectors such as health. The guardian has reported that a 'slew of aid organisations then set up shop but failed to co-ordinate with local officials exactly what was needed to rebuild the nation' (Crook 2011, p.1). Interestingly, at the point of writing Haiti has joined East Timor and other fragile states in a meeting of the g7+, demanding a greater say in donor-driven aid which they see as having 'undermined their nationalist and developmental aspirations' (Crook 2011, p.1); a development which demonstrates the extent to which the Haitian state has felt emasculated by the ruling presence of an NGO 'class' and thus unable to make an integral connection with its citizens.

## 2. NGOs in Collaboration with External Forces

## NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

*"Donors rarely create autonomous organisations; indeed, an aid-created independent civil organisation comes close to an oxymoron" (Kasfir 2004, p.128).*

The second, and contradictory sense in which NGOs can be described as a 'nongovernmental government' which has drained the Haitian state of its capacity, is in terms of their linkages with external governments in making decisions on its behalf. The problematic nature of the NGO presence in Haiti, and elsewhere, can be largely attributed to the paradoxical reality of their organisational foundations. While most, especially humanitarian, NGOs proclaim themselves to be apolitical, with principles of neutrality and impartiality at the root of their mandates, many are in fact funded and thus directed to a considerable extent by the aims and objectives of those same international financial institutions, and the same governments, upon whom many commentators place the blame for Haiti's abysmal conditions. Dupuy has argued that the responsibility for Haiti's problems falls not just upon the actions of its dominant economic and political classes, but also on 'those foreign governments and economic actors with long-standing interests in Haiti; principally those of the US, Canada, France, and their international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank' (Dupuy 2010, p.1). In 2007, about 70 percent of the funding available to Haitian NGOs was distributed by USAID and the Canadian development agency (Zanotti 2010, p.759). Cooley and Ron too have highlighted the considerable dependence of major US relief groups, such as 'CARE' operating in Haiti, on short-term, renewable government contracts (2002, p.14). The ethical dilemma this gives rise to relates closely to Kasfir's analysis of the cyclical relationship between the state and 'civil society'. Contrary to prevailing liberal political theory which portrays civil society and the state as being in constant opposition, Kasfir has argued that 'civil society organisations confront the state, but must also be regulated by the state' (2004, p.11). Interestingly, Kasfir has discussed how the 'paradox of collective action' often means that 'the necessary resources have to come from outsiders – government agencies, foundations, economic associations, or large firms' (2004, p.126). When examined in this light, an uncomfortable picture of Haiti's situation emerges, whereby NGOs are working in 'partnership' with, or one could argue under contract for, those forces which have in turn had a long history of working in partnership with the elites to blame for Haiti's current 'governance vacuum' (Bolton 2011, p.4).

There is certainly a strong strand of criticism within the literature on NGOs which views their role as a friendlier arm of the neoliberal capitalist agenda responsible for maintaining the peripheral position of countries like Haiti. In a similar vein to Petras who sees NGOs as being profit-motivated conmen of the poor 'in the service of imperialism' (1999, p.429), Davis is another commentator who has labeled NGO projects as 'soft imperialism', pouring scorn upon the extent to which NGOs have since the 1990's been drawn into the functional network of the World Bank, becoming 'captive to the agenda of international donors' (2006, p.75-76). With regard to Haiti, Angela Smith has gone so far as to bluntly remark that, 'NGOs do a booming business putting band aids on the mortal wounds their neoliberal donors inflict' (in Whitney 2011, p.1). Arguably though, this vision of NGOs as handmaidens of imperial domination is rather misguided in its implication that these organisations intentionally promote the exploitation of the poor people they proclaim to be helping. Apart from the fact that many NGO workers are surely motivated by worthy intentions originally, it seems these analyses are flawed in their lumping together of a wide range of diverse actors in the NGO field, who are mistakenly presumed to function as a coherent whole without recognition of their often very different organisational cultures.

Despite these points of contention, it does seem that NGOs working in a country like Haiti especially, which has a painful record of external state intervention, should be wary of the 'problems of boundary maintenance between spheres' raised by Chandoke, who asks of civil society organisations 'how overlapping boundaries can possibly contain separate and discrete logics?' (2004, p.148). While Macrae has stressed the need to distinguish here between Francophone and Anglo-Saxon humanitarian traditions, detailing how US and UK NGOs are more connected to their own governments in contrast to the French NGO community which 'fiercely guards its independence from the state' (1999, p.xix), in fact Fassin has argued that the porous border between the governmental and nongovernmental spheres is just as significant in the French context, but is manifested in 'invisible' forms of collaboration (2007, p.155-58). In illustrating this point, Fassin has drawn attention to the considerable number of MSF presidents, supposedly the most sceptical of all NGO actors towards the politicization of aid, who have gone on to occupy positions in the French government (2007, p.154). It must surely be recognised then, that the relationship of resource dependence between NGOs and the state, as well as these more 'invisible' types of collaboration, can impact upon their ability or desire to launch an attack on the structural forces which have

# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

maintained Haiti's position in the global world order.

While NGOs avoid the state in crisis, the contradiction lies in these organisations simultaneously collaborating with outside states safeguarding their own political interests, and with international financial institutions promoting an ideological message which has already caused Haiti damage. In both these senses, NGOs have been acting as a 'nongovernmental government' in Haiti, and in both these ways it can be said that NGOs have undermined the symbiotic nature of the social contract between the Haitian state and its citizens.

## The Aid Worker Bubble

*"In Haiti, there is a popular conception of a 'klas ONG' (NGO class). This is a play on the term 'klas politik', the self-named 'political class' (Schuller 2009, p.92).*

Writing in 1994, Lewis conveyed a very positive vision of the growth of NGOs in Caribbean society, arguing that their increased presence 'promoted the rise of new paradigms for the regional political economy, paradigms that emphasised the need to link macro-level alternatives with new micro-level grassroots alternatives' (p.129). Furthermore, Lewis emphasised their important potential for helping to 'better organise and present' the demands of local social movements, with a stress on the empowering capacity of NGOs, in particular gender-oriented NGOs, to induce self-reliance and independence for marginalised sectors (1994, p.130-33). In the case of Haiti though, these positive prospects do not seem to have played out in reality. Seventeen years on, commentators have instead criticised NGOs for sapping the strength of left-leaning social movements rather than working in partnership with them (Eade 2010, Petras 1999), and there is a particularly widespread perception that their projects have been ineffective due to a failure to move beyond the provision of basic services towards sustainable, transformative development projects owned by the Haitian people. The result has been a kind of 'capacity sucking out' rather than the predicted capacity building (Ignatieff 2003). For instance, both Collier and Brinkerhoff have criticised NGOs' use of exclusively internal personnel when undertaking projects. In his discussion on developing fragile states, Brinkerhoff draws attention to the shortfalls of 'stand-alone' operations which 'fail to integrate with country practices and procedures' (2010, p.70). He argues that the propensity for bypassing capacity development at the local level is 'heightened by the emphasis on assistance templates that assign performance roles to external actors in situations where capacity is weak' (Brinkerhoff 2010, p.70).

Likewise, Collier has criticised the use of solely NGO staff and resources, and has advocated the training up of government officials by NGOs, using government resources to maximise sustainability (1996, p.247). It must be recognised though, that NGOs are restricted in this endeavor by the nature of donor funding; paradoxically, in an effort to increase NGO accountability donors have stepped up the pressure, requiring visible, measurable results so as to see where the money is being spent. As Oxfam has argued in the case of Haiti, 'more flexible funding on the part of donors is needed for NGOs to become active partners of government and community representatives' (2011, p.17). On the rare occasion that Haitian people have been consulted for their views, it is clear that what they desire most is independence, self-determination, and direct participation in the rebuilding effort after the earthquake and beyond; "We saw the National Palace destroyed, "I would like to see Haitian engineers rebuild it, not the foreign engineers, so we can look at the palace proudly in the future and say that Haitians built the National Palace." (O'Connor 2011, p.1). In the same way that state officials have expressed sentiments of exclusion from the reconstruction of their country, a recently conducted Oxfam survey reveals that only 17.5 per cent of citizens polled supported the Action Plan for National Reconstruction and Development (APNRD), most of which was constructed in a top-down manner by the World Bank in collaboration with NGOs, since they 'did not believe it reflected their priority needs' (Oxfam 2011, p.11).

The gap between the positive expectations expressed by commentators such as Lewis, and the realistic shortfalls of NGOs in working with civil society, can be attributed to the false assumption at their root; namely that an increase in NGOs is automatically a good thing for the development of a society, and that these organisations function in a personalized realm of horizontal 'networking' free from the conflict and competition which permeate the state and the market. This is evident where Lewis puts the merits of NGOs down to their being 'able to achieve autonomy from the state and the political process vis-a-vis civil society' (Lewis 1994, p.134). Such a virtuous image of NGOs is a

## NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

classic example of what Chandoke has vehemently criticised; that of a civil society sphere that 'just brings people together in meshes of solidarity, as opposed to meshes of power' (2004, p.143). In fact, it must be recognised that NGOs, especially when placed in the competitive environment of Haiti, which before the earthquake had a concentration of between 8000 and 9000 NGOs (Zanotti 2010, p.757), will behave as organisations like any other; fighting for funding to survive and trying to produce concrete 'results' for their donors. It is at this point that we hit upon one of the ways in which NGOs can be said to have operated within an 'aid worker bubble' in Haiti, and in so doing failed to support civil society in placing demands upon the state.

A rising phenomenon among NGOs since the 1980's has been the 'marketisation' of the aid sector; what Cooley and Ron have described as the 'NGO scramble' (2002), and the NGO community in Haiti is no exception. With such a high concentration of NGOs crammed into a small and already overcrowded area, to stay on in Haiti they must bid on contract work financed by outside government agencies, a situation which encourages preoccupation with marketing, and ultimately morphing into their for-profit counterparts. For instance, the medical journal *Lancet* has recently launched an attack on the way NGOs in Haiti have been 'jostling for position', and putting their own interests above those of the victims in the earthquake (2011, p.). The anxieties of aid workers in this kind of high pressure bubble, can often become less about thinking of innovative ways to build up long-term capacity so that citizens can properly interact with the state, and more about the problems of 'maintenance, survival, and growth that beset every organization' (Bob 2002, p.14).

Compounding this bubble effect of inter-NGO competition, is the 'humanitarian impasse' Laurent speaks of, whereby NGOs have become 'in the eyes of states and beneficiaries, a component of the elusive 'international community' (1999, p.28). Indeed, in the Haitian context one can see how the average person must perceive NGO workers as merging into one big privileged global elite, who live and socialise in the same gated communities as the UN 'MINUSTAH' force which provides their security. Bolton has observed how in Haiti the international community has 'fragmented Haitian space' by putting up literal barriers between the people; 'dividing Haiti into highly secure compounds, surrounded by high walls with tight security which is 'distinctly unwelcoming to Haitians not working for the 'system' (2011, p.30). Throughout Haiti's history the hegemony of men in uniforms has blocked public channels of communication between the state and civil society (Fatton 2006, p.118), and in contemporary Haiti, the overwhelming presence of a homogeneous class of NGO actors in aid worker uniform could be seen as similarly blocking these channels of communication, preventing its social contract from functioning as it should.

The obstruction of Haitian space this 'aid worker bubble' creates, is made worse by a problem which seems to be afflicting the NGO sector more broadly. Van Praag has recently criticised the shortcomings of today's humanitarian aid system for having 'no systematic approach to assessing humanitarian operations through the eyes of recipients' (2011, p.1). While his article notes that progressive actions have been taken by NGOs such as 'CARE' International in Haiti, who have met much enthusiasm in putting suggestion boxes in displaced people's camps, he quips, 'eliciting feedback is one thing; responding to it adequately is another' (2011, p.1). This commentary feeds into both Duffield and Pouligny's depiction of an NGO community functioning in a 'technocratized and technologised' arena shut off from the realities of life on the ground (2011, p.9). To counter this tendency, Grunewald has put forward a similar suggestion to theirs, that systems of follow-up monitoring be put in place that adapt to 'common sense, experience, intuition and the opinions of local resource persons' instead of rigidly applying 'logical processes' of methodology (1999, p.76). Apart from a lack of official feedback mechanisms, NGOs can unknowingly shut civil society actors out of Haitian politics in less obvious ways, for instance by conducting discussions on social services and governance through a cyberspace which is inaccessible to the average Haitian (Bolton 2011, p.14), and by conversing in a policymaking jargon which can lead to grassroots voices going unheard (Lister 2000, p.232). On a simpler level, eighty percent of the Haitian population speak only Creole, and yet the majority of NGO project documents are written in English or occasionally French which is the language only of the privileged ten percent; a problem Oxfam have acknowledged in their evaluation, which notes that the reconstruction commission has 'often made matters worse by sending too many project proposals at too short notice, with many documents available only in English' (2011, p.11). In this sense, the aid worker bubble exacerbates the inequality and exclusion already omnipresent in Haitian society.

Even when civil society actors in Haiti are let into the decision-making arena then, many must struggle with getting

## NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

their viewpoints across to NGOs in a manner that will be understood and respected by those with the power to drive change. These problems of an 'aid worker bubble' culminate in the central issue addressed by Pouligny; the reality that 'while pretending to work with local civil society, outsiders actually collaborate with other outsiders – with themselves.' (2005, p.501). Instead of pretending to build 'new' societies while excluding the majority of their members, as the liberal project typically does, NGOs should instead try to meet citizens at their own level, 'learning lessons from local practices and beliefs', and 'listening to the resources that ordinary people may mobilize' in difficult situations (Pouligny 2005, p.502).

There are signs that major INGOs operating in Haiti and elsewhere are beginning to recognise their tendency to function within a kind of 'Project World theme park', which can result in an inability to see the less visible processes undermining the impact of their projects (Eade 2007, p.633). Growing awareness is evident in the abundance of literature written by those who have a long personal experience of working in the NGO field and have felt compelled to reflect upon and (re)define their humanitarian identity (Barnett and Weiss 2008, p.5). Mirroring Eade's comments, who has herself worked for a Caribbean NGO, Tony Vaux, a senior Oxfam worker, has powerfully exposed the extent to which mundane organisational considerations can work to detract from really paying attention to and supporting the unique context of the 'person in need' (2001, p.63). Furthermore, Oxfam have this year released a briefing paper on Haiti which acknowledges that NGOs 'should do much more to support the efforts of the Haitian authorities and 'should be more accountable and do much more to build the capacity of the Haitian people' (2011, p.1-12).

### **'Partners in Health' (PIH): A ray of hope for the future of NGOs?**

The pitfalls of NGO involvement in Haiti signify a need to reform the decentralised nature of today's system of aid delivery, which works largely outside public institutions and local systems and channels resources through NGOs which as shown, are often trapped within an aid worker bubble. While important, 'such aid cannot influence structural factors such as macroeconomic policy or public health and education' (Macrae 1999, p.xx). Broader political factors such as these represent the cause for Haiti's protracted 'emergency', and are factors which can only be addressed by NGOs working in harmony with the Haitian state and citizens to ensure a thriving social contract with the power to implement lasting development. One of the few NGOs in Haiti which seems to already be working in this direction, is 'Partners in Health', whose achievements hold out hope for the future role of NGOs.

While PIH differs from major INGOs in being born out of the context of a local Haitian village, it has now developed into a high-tech provider of free health care; today ranking as one of the largest NGO healthcare providers in Haiti (PIH 2009, p.1), and has expanded its work to other areas of the developing world. As Zannotti has argued, its wide-ranging success derives from its 'training and hiring of thousands of Haitian community health workers' (2010, p.761), thus building sustainability through tapping into Haitian abilities rather than showcasing the skills of NGO staff.

The stated mandate of PIH is remarkably in tune with suggestions put forth by theorists concerning the role which should be played by NGOs in repairing conflict-torn societies. In particular, PIH's mandate runs parallel to Pouligny's thesis which, while conveying a clearly sceptical attitude towards the conduct of NGO programmes up till now, is equally clear in putting forth possible methods for improving the practice of outsiders who 'too often function blindly', and in stressing that NGOs should think of themselves as 'facilitators in a leverage process' rather than the main actors (Pouligny 2005, p.508). Goodhand's theoretical work is likewise bolstered by the success story of PIH, whose awareness of the inclusion of the state as being integral to project effectiveness is evident in its commitment to working with the Haitian state as opposed to avoiding it, which as Goodhand has remarked, is the 'default setting of NGOs' (2006, p.109). Specifically, the fifth principle within PIH's stated mandate; that of 'serving the poor through the public sector', which states that the organisation aims not to establish 'parallel systems', but to 'strengthen and complement existing public health infrastructure' (PIH 2010, p.1), demonstrates its realisation that NGOs are just one element of a bigger picture and cannot be seen to be, or see themselves, as the main drivers of change. Overall, the success of the PIH model and the otherwise largely negative impact of NGOs in Haiti thus far indicate the necessity not of pulling them out of the country altogether, but instead to rethink the methods by which their projects are implemented. As Collier has argued with regard to NGOs in Sub-Saharan Africa, 'roads can be fixed, wells dug, people fed, or seeds distributed. What is important, however, is not that these things are done, but *how* they are



# NGOs in Haiti: Caught in an Aid Worker Bubble

Written by Grace Everest

done' (1996, p.247). Up till now, NGOs in Haiti have been 'running the show in terms of development' (Schuller 2007, p.114), and to Haiti's detriment. A kaleidoscope of NGOs, whether subconsciously or knowingly, seem to have occupied an 'aid worker bubble' which has essentially blocked interaction between the Haitian state and its citizens, and thus prevented their respective capacities from developing in the way in which is desperately needed if the country is to be governed effectively. NGOs may be well meaning, but 'they are not the engine that will generate self-sustained growth in Haiti' (Fatton 2010, p.1).

## Conclusion

Haiti's vulnerability has only accelerated in the wake of the earthquake; geologists have expressed concern that the 2010 earthquake could in fact have increased the chance of another deadly earthquake hitting the area in the near future (BBC 2010). This danger highlights the absolute necessity for the Haitian state to take the reins in steering sustainable development, and for members of Haitian civil society rather than foreign helpers in the form of NGOs, to take the lead in placing demands upon the government. In examining what role NGOs have played in Haiti's history of external intervention, it has been suggested that NGOs have destructively transplanted a parallel system of governance, often having been caught up within an aid worker bubble which has stood between the Haitian state and its citizens and thus undermined the symbiotic nature of their social contract. What this in turn sheds light on, is the highly complex nature of NGO involvement in developing countries more broadly; often unbeknownst to them, NGOs can become sucked into the 'liberal project' (Young 1995) and merge into the elusive 'international community' in the eyes of the recipient state and its citizens. This point taps into a broader issue concerning the necessity for NGOs to recognize that their presence cannot be simplified into a neutral, impartial act of charity, but that their actions often have distinctly political consequences. In order to make a lasting, positive change in Haiti NGOs must recognize this propensity, and take on board Calhoun's central thesis of the need to address the 'emergency imaginary' by 'recognizing both the contradictions and the limits of the global order' of which they are a part (2008, p.88).

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Written by Grace Everest

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Written by: Grace Everest  
Written at: University of Sussex  
Written for: Anna Stavrianakis  
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