

# WORKING WITH STUDENTS ON A MIXED-METHODS, SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HAITI'S INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS

By Mark Schuller

Haiti's earthquake inspired one of the most generous outpourings of aid ever. Over half of United States households and 80 percent of African American households contributed something to the effort. In addition to an astonishing \$1.3 billion contributed in cash donations, many people wanted to volunteer their time and efforts. To accommodate this demand, daily flights to Haiti doubled, and a new air carrier joined the two major United States companies. I was at one of the schools with the highest percentage of Haitian students, York College, so I fielded dozens of requests—from Haitian Americans as well as others, students as well as faculty and staff—to take them with me on a trip to Haiti. Would this have been useful? I pondered. In addition, echoing similar concerns of the National Science Foundation (NSF) program officer, would they be safe? More basically, is this desire to help useful, beyond the tangible results seen in a local effort accompanied by the good feelings of having done something? Also, from the perspective of an applied anthropologist employed as an academic, would the benefits of undergraduate student participation in a research project outweigh the risks? In the end, I would have to say yes.

I have been working in Haiti as an anthropologist since 2001. As I wrote in this journal (Schuller 2010a), my work saw a shift away from a simplistic "activist" anthropology to a more nuanced and rigorous academic applied anthropology. I was already studying the impact of foreign funding on NGOs (Schuller 2012) and disasters (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008) when a 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti. Having lost more than two dozen

good friends, neighbors, collaborators, colleagues, and one woman whom we had filmed in documentary *Poto Mitan* (Bergan and Schuller 2009), and having developed relationships with both university and social movement groups for almost a decade at that point, I had both a unique obligation and opportunity to get involved in studying and advocating for the rights of people living in camps, which began to dot the landscape almost immediately after the seismic event.

My colleagues in both groups encouraged me to document the living conditions in a scientific fashion, hoping that my stature now as having a position as a professor, having recently been given a blog on *Huffington Post*, and having the capacity to conduct the research would be able to make some sort of impact. I willingly obliged. In the summer of 2010, I led a team of eight undergraduate students of mine at the Faculté d'Ethnologie, where I have been affiliated since 2003 and have been teaching since 2004, to conduct quantitative research on camp conditions, aid, and the camp committees that are the link between the population and the humanitarian agencies giving out the aid. We sampled one in eight camps in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area. The students did a phenomenal job; the data they collected despite very harrowing conditions represents the largest independent data set on the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The resulting report (Schuller 2010b) made its way to policy and activist circles, from the UN and donor agencies to grassroots solidarity groups. It also was the basis for several scholarly publications.

This report, "Unstable Foundations," documents persistent gaps in services and also low levels of populations' involvement and even awareness of

these camp committees. For example, 40.5 percent of camps lacked water, and 30.3 percent of camps lacked a toilet; on average each toilet in the camp was shared by 273 people, despite Sphere Minimum Standards of 20 people per toilet. Between 32 and 35 percent of the population were aware of the activities, meetings, strategies, or even the name of the camp committee. Students collected all of the data.

The existence of NGOs acting as camp managers in the camps had a predictably positive, statistically significant impact on camp services. However, NGOs managed a small portion of camps, only 27 percent of the sample. Interestingly, their presence had a negative impact on citizen involvement and awareness of camp committees as well. What explained this seeming paradox? It seemed to me that longer-term, on-the-ground, ethnographic research would be necessary to probe this situation. I knew that I would need to again assemble a large and qualified team; given the positive experience with the students the previous year and given the increasing interest at York based on my presentation of my 2010 research, I decided to craft a collaboration between the schools. I retooled my NSF grant written before the earthquake, but submitted by my university after, to focus on this impact of NGOs on camp committees and broadly what could be called "civic infrastructure" in the camps, defined as the inter-related spheres of relationships. Luckily, I was awarded the grant, which enabled me to do the longer-term, comparative ethnography that would be necessary to answer these questions. Specifically, it would allow for United States based undergraduate students to travel to Haiti and also to hire Haitian students to work with them.



Photo by Mark Schuller

### *Haitian and United States Students Exchange Ideas*

I was also fortunate enough to be teaching at a school with a large Haitian population. When I announced the call for the study abroad, I had 26 applicants. I had a meeting where I reported on my recent follow-up study assessing progress after the October 2010 cholera outbreak. I passed out flyers to an orientation meeting to explain the process. I asked students to write answers to a series of short questions, send their transcript and resume, and list two scholarly and two professional references. I had funding to bring eight students to Haiti. Given the difficulties of conducting research as well as the political situation (the United States State Department still warns citizens against traveling to Haiti), I had an involved application process and contacted references. I had to make sure that the students were responsible and mature in addition to being good learners. I took students who had at least a 3.2 GPA, but also who have demonstrated a certain professionalism. I asked references to comment on their ability to handle stressful situations, their individual motivation, and their reliability. In the end, I chose five, all of whom were from Haiti (though one of them, a Haitian American, had never been to Haiti; see Bernard, this issue).

The students from the City University of New York (CUNY) were paired with a student from the Faculté d'Ethnologie, each of whom had experience conducting research with me before. I chose the Faculté d'Ethnologie because the skills and expertise of fieldwork, requiring understanding of customs, quick adaptation, and flexibility, was essential. The CUNY students were from a range of disciplines, including nursing, pre-med, and psychology in addition to anthropology and Black Studies. The entire team—CUNY and Faculté d'Ethnologie students as well as myself—met every morning over breakfast to address problem-solving issues and to conduct recurrent training. We discussed our findings and our difficulties. They also kept one another going. The Haitian team member texted me when they entered and when they left the camp. If I didn't hear from one of them by late afternoon, I called to inquire. On the way home from the camps, the CUNY students were to enter the data into the Excel spreadsheet. Mostly, they offered one another words of encouragement or relieved the stress by retelling a particularly poignant, sad, or frustrating story. I joined the CUNY students for

dinner, where we discussed our roles as anthropologists conducting research on people's misery, as foreigners (yes, the Haitian Americans were also considered *blan* [foreigners] as Semé details [this issue]). Specifically, we discussed the ethical, moral, political, and epistemological challenges.

Students went to the field for five weeks; the first several days were simply observation and introductions. Slowly, they went to the field with a draft 56-question survey asking about everything from where they were born and when and why they came to Port-au-Prince; where they lived on January 12, 2010; how many members of their family were lost in the quake; their household, economic, and civil indicators before and after the earthquake; their understandings of the camp committees, NGOs, the Haitian government, and the UN; their priorities; and their perception of the future. Each team conducted 100 surveys, administered over a two and a half week period. Given the overexposure of aid workers conducting research, not to mention the importance of obtaining residents' clarity on often-foreign concepts, it took a long time to conduct the surveys. Yet, in the end, they collected information from 791 households from eight camps (three other Faculté d'Ethnologie students, the most professional, independent, and detailed from the previous year's research, went on their own).

These eight camps were chosen from the original database of 106 camps based on a purposive sample, four with NGO camp managers and four without. I had attempted to also pay attention to size of camps, with two very large camps in the sample and four small camps. I also—unsuccessfully—tried to have a comparison of camps with committees that had a majority of women, but there were too few.

The quantitative data was quite telling. For example, only 28.5 percent of the people were born in Port-au-Prince. This is a powerful lived reality of the impact of neoliberalism; the capital's population increased fourfold in the two decades following the mid-1980s (Dupuy 2012). Half of the people left

because of economic reasons (48.5%)—as neoliberalism destroyed the peasant economy (DeWind and Kinley III 1988). Also importantly, foreign aid since the 1915 United States occupation centralized resources in the capital city (Jean-Baptiste 2012; Trouillot 2012), which can be seen in the fact that over a quarter, that is, 27.9 percent, left the provinces because of the lack of schools (see also “Hélène’s” testimony in *Poto Mitan*, Bergan and Schuller 2009). This massive urbanization explains many of the social problems encountered and also increased the death toll of the earthquake.

Anthropologist Michel Laguerre (1982) described how urbanization altered but did not destroy the traditional household system, or *lakou*. The aid had an immediate impact on the *lakou*, multi-generational, matrifocal household typical of post-plantation Caribbean (Clarke 1957). Before the earthquake, the average household size was 5.37; this number corresponds to other studies such as Institut Haitien de Statistique et d’Informatique (IHSI), Haiti’s statistical information office, and a USAID study (Schwartz, Pierre, and Calpas 2011). In the camps, household size was 3.36. While people did lose family members, .8 on average, we asked people to enumerate with whom they lived and who they lost in the earthquake. Many of them were cousins and not a part of their original household. The bigger reason suggested in many qualitative interviews with UN, NGO, Haitian government, and IDPs, however, was about aid policies. Until the Haitian government stopped it in April, food was delivered by a system of ration cards handed to camp committees to give to women as presumed heads of households, following World Food Program guidelines. Following the rules laid out before them, families splintered, with many young women, some in their teens, becoming new heads of households.

Students were learning quickly how to adapt to the field: how to respond to quizzical or even exasperated local residents, how to approach people, how to blend a humanistic approach with



Photo by Mark Schuller

### *Students Presenting at a Congressional Briefing*

social scientific precision about terms, and how to be more detailed observers. Challenges remained, such as balancing their workload (they also had to learn how to enter their data into an Excel spreadsheet), but more importantly how to deal with the overwhelmingly depressing state of affairs without remaining hopeless. Students had to be able to answer honestly what use was talking with them after countless others had already interviewed these same people, and their lot had not improved.

The information the students collected—and later analyzed and wrote about, as they prepared a session for the SfAA meetings in Baltimore—was powerful. As Noël describes (this issue), the aid given by NGOs does not match the priorities of the residents. Fewer than one percent of the population knew why agencies gave the aid that they did. There were variations across the different camps. For example, Nelzy points to the fact that residents in the camp she studied had far higher degrees of knowledge and trust in their committee and lower levels of violence. This comparative approach demands that we look for patterns and explanations in the data. These are but a few examples of the findings in this first step, the quantitative survey.

While I had adopted a quantitative approach at the behest of my Haitian colleagues, to “speak truth to power” in advocacy efforts, I found that, in Washington, policymakers and legislators were more interested in students’ ethnographic stories, based on their 10 qualitative interviews and their five weeks of participant observation. These papers were presented to the Congressional Black Caucus after we had presented at the SfAA annual meeting in Baltimore. This was my third time in Washington after the earthquake, and I could sense a “Haiti fatigue” in the words of one Congressional staffer. People were used to seeing professionals like me, and more often NGO employees, offering our expertise and quantitative findings rather than undergraduate students new to ethnographic research. When students spoke about their daily experiences in the camps, people put away their Blackberries. Whether it was because they were students or because of the power of ethnography, of sharing local people’s stories, it got their attention in Congress as well as the State Department. Their United States Representative invited them to create a Facebook page to activate the Haitian Diaspora in Brooklyn, and she hired one of them, Bernard, to work in her district office.

They created a page for the first time in most of their lives as activists. Some of them attended public events, rallies, and wrote letters to the editor. Ultimately, the plan to “take the show on the road” was stymied when we couldn’t secure a locale for their discussion, despite the fact that it was a sister CUNY campus.

For these students, the comparative ethnographic research offered a unique opportunity to look at how post-disaster aid works (or does not) on the ground. As Ulcena and Bernard report, internal

tore people’s tents and began rebuilding the outer wall to his property to shut people out. Nelzy details a favoritism that undercuts an otherwise well-managed camp, discussing two women’s allegation of sexual misconduct against the leader.

Ethnographic research offered the questions to ask and presented solutions for these students—simple as they may be—for greater resident inclusion into decision making, even and especially in a humanitarian crisis “emergency”

citizen put distance between her and the people in the camps, which caused her to think about not only her identity but some of the most enduring stereotypes about Haitian people, including their “resilience.” Like other Haitian writers, Bernard challenges this construct as suspect, citing information from her study of Camp Kolonbi (Colombia). Bernard details the many inequities and inefficiencies in the disaster response. Stephanie Semé also discusses the surprise at being called *blan* (a foreigner), particularly insulting because she went to high school in Haiti. Semé’s ethnographic account of “Nan Bannann” camp (in the banana trees) gives voice to the despair and sense of abandonment. The camp is out of sight, out of the way of main thoroughfares, and apparently out of mind. Semé’s account focuses on the physical condition of the camp and its denuded environment, the lack of economic opportunity, and the dearth of programs for children.

Adlin Noël, who had studied a very large and urban camp—ironically named “Place de la Paix,” or Peace Plaza, despite the reputation of violence—analyzes the disconnect between residents’ priorities and the aid given. In addition to the story noted above, Noël discusses the statistics of residents’ priorities, the aid given, and also notes that less than one percent of people could identify why the NGOs gave what they did. Noël was in the camp during a surprise visit from President Michel Martelly, and this solidified the concern about the importance of keeping promises, for camp committee members, NGOs, the Haitian government, and foreign agencies.

Tracey Ulcena noted this disconnect between aid given and local needs. One particular NGO left when residents told them that they didn’t need the soap given. Ulcena studied a similarly large camp, Karade. Unlike all others, Karade was a relocation camp, on land obtained by the Haitian government, and so land tenure was secure. Ulcena noted that the residents in the relocation camp were treated far better, with far greater resources than others. She also noted a chasm between the residents and

---

“ Ethnographic research offered the questions to ask and presented solutions for these students—simple as they may be—for greater resident inclusion into decision making, even and especially in a humanitarian crisis “emergency” phase. The comparative analyses so far suggest that many camp committees, many of whom were creations of the NGOs giving out aid, are abusing their power as intermediaries. ”

---

confusion within NGOs hampers effective results. Bernard described how NGO workers thought that she and her research partner worked for that same NGO. Ulcena reports how UN troops are ineffective in providing security in the camp where they are stationed. Residents call them “photocopies” because they don’t act like real security agents but like pictures hung on a wall. All have reported a particular story that merits reflection. Noël described a situation in his first week when the local population waited overnight for a distribution; when residents found out that it was only a few bars of soap and aquatabs, they expressed their frustration against the committee and the NGO. Semé describes a total abandonment of the camp she studied and no protection when one of the landowners

phase. The comparative analyses so far suggest that many camp committees, many of whom were creations of the NGOs giving out aid, are abusing their power as intermediaries. Noël reports that residents call the NGO-created committee *pòch prela*, saying that the committee has pockets the size of tarps, siphoning off aid. Again, a comparative approach suggests differences based on the constituency of these committees. Unfortunately, camps that had to fend for themselves without outside assistance have greater confidence from, participation with, and visibility to the local population.

Sabine Bernard discusses the surprises in store for her as a *Diaspora* (a member of the Haitian Diaspora). Her identity as Haitian was called into question, and her privilege as a United States

the local committee and, as discussed above, the UN troops. Her experience following up with a young boy who was beaten by his mother highlights the lack of accountability and responsibility within the protection system.

Sandy Nelzy studied what remained of the camp at St. Louis de Gonzague, half of whom had relocated to Karade, the "lucky" ones. Compared to others, this camp was cleaner, better organized, and more tranquil, with less acts of violence and much lower fears of insecurity on the part of residents. This was due in part to the hands-on approach of the committee, who was far better known than those in other camps. Unfortunately, as noted above, this committee leader played favorites and allegedly used his influence to try and have sex with two married women.

These essays written by undergraduate students, two of whom have entered and two of whom have applied to grad school with the other just finishing up from an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) highlight the transformative potential, possibilities, difficulties, and importance of applied ethnographic research. All five have spoken about how this experience shaped their future vision and postgraduate plans. As undergraduates at an underprivileged school, they demonstrate that it is not too soon to begin a career in applied social science research.

### Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank the people in Haiti who made this research possible, especially the IDPs themselves, and colleagues in both activist organizations and the Université d'État d'Haïti. This research was supported by a Senior Research Grant (#1122704) from the National Science Foundation, the Professional Staff Congress / CUNY Faculty Research Grant, Reaching Up, and Haiti Education on Displacement Issues Project. I would like to thank my students, including the five who published here as well as the students at the Faculté d'Ethnologie: Marie Lourdes Alexis, Théagène Dauphin, Mackenzy Dor, Jean-Rony Emile, Junior Jean

Francois, Robenson Jn-Julien, Roody Therilus, and Castelot Val.

### References Cited

- Bergan, Renée, and Mark Schuller, dirs. 2009 *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*. Watertown, Mass.: Documentary Educational Resources.
- Clarke, Edith 1957 *My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Family in Three Selected Communities in Jamaica*. New York: G. Allen and Unwin.
- DeWind, Josh, and David H. Kinley III 1988 *Aiding Migration: The Impact of International Development Assistance on Haiti*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Dupuy, Alex 2012 *The Neoliberal Legacy in Haiti*. In *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake*. Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, eds. Pp. 23-27. Sterling, Va.: Kumarian Press.
- Gunewardena, Nandini, and Mark Schuller, eds. 2008 *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction*. Lanham, Md.: Alta Mira Press.
- Jean-Baptiste, Chenet 2012 *Haiti's Earthquake: A Further Insult to Peasants' Lives*. In *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake*. Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, eds. Pp. 97-100. Sterling, Va.: Kumarian Press.
- Laguerre, Michel 1982 *Urban Life in the Caribbean: A Study of a Haitian Urban Community*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishers.
- Schuller, Mark 2010a *From Activist to Applied Anthropologist to Anthropologist? On the Politics of Collaboration*. *Practicing Anthropologist* 32(1):43-47.
- 2010b *Unstable Foundations: The Impact of NGOs on Human Rights for Port-au-Prince's 1.5 Million Homeless*. New York: The City University of New York and Port-au-Prince: The Université d'État d'Haïti.
- 2012 *Killing With Kindness: Haiti, International Aid, and NGOs*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Schwartz, Timothy, Yves-François Pierre, and Eric Calpas 2011 *BARR Survey Report: Building Assessments and Rubble Removal in Quake-Affected Neighborhoods in Haiti*. Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development.
- Trouillot, Evelyne 2012 *Abse sou Klou: Reconstructing Exclusion*. In *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake*. Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, eds. Pp. 103-107. Sterling, Va.: Kumarian Press.

### Mark Schuller

(mschuller@niu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and NGO Leadership and Development at Northern Illinois University and affiliate at the Faculté d'Ethnologie, l'Université d'État d'Haïti. Supported by the National Science Foundation and others, Schuller's research on globalization, NGOs, gender, and disasters in Haiti has been published in 20 book chapters and peer-reviewed articles as well as public media, including a column in Huffington Post. He is the author of *Killing with Kindness: Haiti, International Aid, and NGOs* (Rutgers 2012) and co-editor of three volumes, including *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake* (Kumarian Press 2012). He is co-director / co-producer of documentary *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* (Documentary Educational Resources 2009). ■

