

Humanitarian aid and local power structures: lessons from Haiti's 'shadow disaster'

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This paper investigates the confluence of humanitarian aid, centralisation, and politics. The 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti on 12 January 2010 led to more than USD 16 billion in pledges. By contrast, Hurricane Matthew, which made landfall in Haiti on 4 October 2016, stayed in the shadows, attracting about one per cent of the amount. While the earthquake exhibited one face of centralisation, the Category 4 storm laid bare rural vulnerabilities shaped by postcolonial state neglect, and reinforced by the influx of non-governmental organisations in the 'Republic of Port-au-Prince'. The study draws on data from four case studies in two departments to illuminate the legacies of hyper-centralisation in Haiti. Compounding matters, Matthew struck in the middle of an extended election that the international community attempted to control again. The paper argues that disaster assistance and politics are uncomfortably close, while reflecting on the momentary decentralisation of aid after the hurricane and its effectiveness.

Keywords: aid, decentralisation, elections, Haiti, humanitarian aid, Hurricane Matthew, hurricanes, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), politics

Introduction

Haiti occupies a central place in humanitarian aid discourse. Tens of thousands of individuals played a role in the aftermath of the earthquake on 12 January 2010. This was one of the largest international humanitarian efforts ever mounted, and certainly it was among the most visible. To many people, 'Haiti' is equivalent to the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that shook the capital, Post-au-Prince, and nearby regions a decade ago. International agencies pledged USD 13 billion to the effort, and individuals contributed more than USD 3 billion. This was due in part to the amount of airtime that the event received, inspiring glitterati such as George Clooney, Wyclef Jean, and, most notably, Sean Penn. Former United States President Bill Clinton led official fundraising efforts as the United Nations (UN) Special Envoy for Haiti. As scrutinised by many journalists, aid workers, and researchers, the multi-billion-dollar response failed to live up to Clinton's motto of 'building back better'.¹ The public conversations took a critical turn owing to the release of films such as Raoul Peck's *Fatal Assistance* (2013), and many articles that asked 'where did the

money go?'. The downward spiral continued as financial and sexual exploitation scandals emerged involving well-known non-governmental organisations (NGOs), most notably the American Red Cross and Oxfam GB.

By contrast, Hurricane Matthew, which made landfall in Haiti on 4 October 2016, stayed in the shadows. This Category 4 storm attained the most powerful direct hit since Hurricane Hazel in 1954, which opened the flood gates to the operations of international NGOs.² The entire country was affected by Matthew, but the south-west peninsula was impacted most. Total official funding from international agencies in response to the UN Flash Appeal did not meet its goal of USD 139 million, reaching a mere USD 88.6 million, equivalent to approximately one per cent of the pledges and individual donations following the earthquake (UN OCHA, 2017). The response was underwhelming to say the least.

Although several factors contributed to the minimal response, this paper addresses three of them, owing to limited space. The first factor can be attributed to the collective residue of stories about ineffective aid, the absence of accountability and transparency, and the persistent trope of Haiti's ungovernability, cumulating in 'donor fatigue'. The second factor pertains to the timing of the hurricane in 2016, which allowed aid to be used strategically by various local and national actors around the time of the national election. The third factor concerns the pervasive presence of NGOs centralised in Port-au-Prince, reinforcing postcolonial state neglect of the countryside, with little comprehension of or desire to understand the realities of rural residents.

The 2010 earthquake laid bare the ramifications of the country's centralisation, as national institutions were levelled and offices turned to rubble in the urban capital, creating an institutional vacuum. By contrast, the 2016 hurricane illuminated the rural vulnerabilities produced by the other side of centralisation (Wagner, 2016), as resources were concentrated far from affected regions, exacerbating the impacts on rural communities—compounded by an extremely hampered response. Drawing on data from four case studies in two departments (South and Grand Anse), this paper spotlights the two faces of hyper-centralisation in Haiti. At the intersection of humanitarian aid, centralisation, and politics, it reflects on the processes of aid decentralisation after Matthew, arguing for further accountability.

Haiti protests made headlines again in June 2019, as the capital and several major provincial cities came to a standstill. Since July 2018, there have been stretches when businesses, institutions, and schools have been closed. One was in February 2019 when the country was shut down for 10 days owing to mass demonstrations (Helaoua, 2019). Beginning in September 2019, the country was on lockdown for nine weeks. The demands increasingly centre on President Jovenel Moïse stepping down following the publication of the most recent audit (Charles, 2019). The 612-page document implicates him and other existing and former high-ranking officials and members of the private sector in corrupt activities involving Petrocaribe funds, a Venezuela-led oil alliance of 18 Caribbean states (Anakawona, 2019).

Foreign media coverage largely continues to highlight the violence and corruption, and without background reinforces familiar, postcolonial narratives and racialised stereotypes of Haiti (Ulysse, 2015; Schuller, 2016). However, the current situation is a long time in the making. Injecting context into the production and maintenance of a postcolonial 'failed state', sometimes called a 'kleptocracy', Haitian scholars Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990a), Alex Dupuy (1997), and Robert Fatton (2002) detail a 'ménage-à-trois' of the Haitian state, local elites, and foreign agencies (Schuller, 2007). This collusion, encompassing humanitarian aid as well, maintains the 'failed state' of Haiti, facilitating particular interests, and thus reproducing outcomes desired by those in positions of power.

Methodology

Both authors have worked in Haiti since the early 2000s, blending scholarship and real-world engagement, mostly with the NGO sector and on aid accountability. Mark Schuller is affiliated with the Université d'Etat d'Haïti (State University of Haiti) and was conducting a five-year study when Hurricane Matthew struck, comparing areas directly affected by the 2010 earthquake (attracting more humanitarian NGOs to work on crisis response) with areas less affected by the event (where development-oriented NGOs working on longer-term infrastructure, social, or economic projects predominated). Following visits to the field from 2013, this author organised eight research pairs in summer 2016, combining the strengths of Haitian students with those of US students. Teams conducted research, including the administration of 100 84-question surveys, compiled extensive field notes, and recorded semi-structured interviews with five to eight individuals.

Through a cruel twist of fate, the four 'development' sites became 'humanitarian' zones following Hurricane Matthew. In its aftermath, Schuller and the other researchers visited the field locations in the two departments of South and Grand Anse. The Haitian students returned in December 2016 for two weeks, conducting follow-up interviews with 25 of the 100 households from the previous summer, using a modified survey. Reports based on this work were written and published in Creole and English (Anthropolitics, n.d.).

Kaiting Jessica Hsu has a 15-year relationship with the commune of Abricots. She found her way to Abricots two days after Matthew when the mobile telephone towers were damaged, and she continued to collaborate with many community leaders in the wake of the hurricane. She has a longstanding relationship with institutional and community leaders in Abricots, as well as with local associations and foundations. Acting in solidarity, Hsu attempted to link effective resources for the community's recovery after the event. In addition, she played a role in connecting researchers with other analysts and community leaders in Abricots and Jeremie to develop field sites for a larger research project on the sociocultural impacts of NGOs. In addition, she assisted local civil society organisation delegations with assessments throughout the country after Matthew, and was a local electoral observer in 2015 and 2016 with the

Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (National Human Rights Defence Network; RNDDH). More specifically, Hsu was also an electoral observer in Grand Anse on 20 November 2016.

Hurricane Matthew

Interim President Jocelerme Privert visited the Centre d'Opérations d'Urgence National (National Emergency Operations Center; COUN) on 2 October 2016. From there, he addressed the nation, warning the entire population to prepare for Hurricane Matthew. The information was received mostly via radio broadcast and circulated by *teledjòl* (word of mouth), with many hearing the alert just a day before Matthew made landfall. For those who did receive it, largely they still did not know what to expect. They were advised to stockpile food, to put livestock in safe places, and to seek shelter (RNDDH, 2016; Marcelin and Cela, 2017).³

In Abricots, 3 October was a typical Sunday; people had gathered from different rural districts to attend church. Those whose houses lined the beach were still in their homes. 'Where am I going to go?', one mother asked, while indicating that there was no way to rush her crops growing in her *jaden* (garden) to stockpile food when told to heed the warning. This response was repeated by many others throughout different sections of Abricots, some living in *kay pay* (houses built with straw roofs) or *kay tè* (houses constructed using interwoven pieces of wood and a mud combination to fill the gaps) that might have been covered with straw or corrugated aluminium sheets. Prior to the notification of an incoming hurricane, the country had been experiencing the worst drought in 35 years, causing extensive crop loss (UN News, 2016) and the earth to crack, unable to absorb the rain quickly (Williams, 2011). For years, farmers had been highlighting the changing of seasons that made the planting of certain crops less predictable.⁴ Starting in 2012, the drought was interrupted by Hurricane Sandy, which triggered massive flooding and damage throughout the country, including further loss of crops. Sandy also hit coastal cities of the US, putting Haiti in the shadows, receiving little international coverage and, therefore, little attention (Watts, 2012).

The crops remaining after the preceding years were largely drought-resistant, such as sweet potato, taro, and yam (Robin, 2017). At around 07:00 on 4 October 2016, Hurricane Matthew made landfall on the southwest coast near Les Anglais, with winds of as much as 130 knots (about 145 miles per hour) (Stewart, 2017). The storm moved north across the southwestern peninsula and into the western part of the Gulf of Gonave, where it arrived at 14:00, before heading northwest. The heavy rains and wind continued in the departments of South and Grand Anse. Residents recalled rainfall that seemed to be falling diagonally and sometimes even sideways for almost 12 hours into the morning of 5 October.

As the storm passed, corrugated metal roofing flew on the wind, proving to be deadly for many who sought shelter, while a departmental volunteer with the Civil

Protection Directorate was killed on the coast of Les Anglais as he encouraged residents to evacuate.⁵ The Disaster Response Centre in Abricots, one of 10 built in Haiti by the US Southern Command (Haiti Libre, 2013), remained locked until the morning of 5 October, many hours after Matthew had made landfall. The death tolls rose, as the bodies that had been swept away by the swollen Cavaillon River came to rest at its mouth, emptying into the ocean.⁶ The official national death toll was 546, with an additional 438 people injured (UN OCHA, 2016), but this number never accounted for those who passed away in the days after the storm owing to the bare landscape that left people highly vulnerable, traumatised by the strength and impact of the hurricane and in desperate need of basic necessities such as food, medical care, shelter, and water. In Abricots alone, there were a locally estimated 20 deaths in October following Matthew, but no official counts were performed in the aftermath (AJVPA and FPDI, 2016).⁷

Officially, more than 2.1 million people were affected, with 1.4 million requiring humanitarian assistance (UN OCHA, 2017). In addition, there was USD 2,781 million of economic damage overall, including USD 573.3 million of damage to the agricultural sector, and USD 2.2 billion was assessed as necessary for reconstruction, representing 25 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (République d'Haïti, 2016). The only houses still standing in the departments of South and Grand Anse were the few built out of concrete, and 85–90 per cent of the livestock in many areas had been killed (République d'Haïti, 2016). These animals are equivalent to savings accounts for rural inhabitants, as, for example, Haitian Creole pigs had been prior to the Swine Fever scare in the early 1980s (Diederich, 1985; Farmer, 1992).⁸ The LaDigue Bridge on Route Nationale 2, the only road connecting Port-au-Prince to the southern peninsula, collapsed during the storm, as well as smaller foot bridges throughout Grand Anse. The mobile telephone network was down in Grand Anse for around one week.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) reported on 5 October that COUN and Haiti's network of Departmental Emergency Operation Centers (COUD) had been activated by the Directorate of Civil Protection (DPC), but that they did not have generators or satellite telephones. Two satellite telephones were said to have been made available to COUN to contact areas that were disconnected (UN OCHA, 2016).

As a result of the cancellation of the first round of polling, an interim prime minister was in place, who called for all aid to the country from any donor, national or international, to be channelled through the DPC and the Permanent Secretariat for Risk and Disaster Management (SPGRD), which both COUN and COUD fall under. Claiming to be in close coordination with the Government of Haiti, UN OCHA launched a flash appeal for USD 139 million, but received only 64 per cent of it (USD 88.6 million) after five months. Privert's demand to work with the Government of Haiti exposed the scars of the earthquake response. Interior Minister François Anick Joseph refused to distribute tents for thousands without shelter in order to avoid a replication of the displacement camps (Ahmed, 2016). The tent camps

and cities had been symbols of the failure of post-earthquake aid, and were imprinted in the minds of many around the world, synonymous with Haiti. However, the government had not allocated money for disaster mitigation or sufficiently funded COUN and COUD so that they could respond to the disaster.

State neglect of the countryside is not a new phenomenon in the country. In fact, it has been present since the republic's inception in 1804. These historic patterns contributed to what is commonly referred to as the 'Republic of Port-au-Prince', fortified by the 'Republic of NGOs'.

Haiti's history of centralisation

It was estimated in 2016 that slightly more than 40 per cent of Haiti's population resided in the rural countryside, a dramatic decline from almost 85 per cent in 1960. The country is cited as being among the top 10 most rapidly urbanising nations between 1990 and 2014.⁹ Most rural residents are subsistence farmers, frequently referred to as *moun an deyò*, literally meaning 'outside people' (Barthélémy, 1990; Smith, 2001). They are not just physically isolated, but also politically and socially excluded. The historic response to this marginalisation was to create a more collective, sovereign culture characterised by a distrust of the state. Although the communal culture was largely prevalent in the countryside, the displacement of people from rural areas has led to local diasporas within urban centres, with some rural collectivist traditions surviving urbanisation.

Haitian commentators frequently refer to Haiti as the 'Republic of Port-au-Prince' because of the hyper-centralisation of the state and the consolidation of economic, military, and political power in the capital. Prior to the earthquake, more than two million people lived in a city built for some 200,000. Seventy-five per cent of all civil servants and government employees were based in Port-au-Prince, along with 80 per cent of banking, commercial, and industrial facilities, making it also the economic hub (Robleto-Gonzalez, 2012). More than one-quarter of the primary, secondary, and technical schools and three-quarters of higher education institutions, as well as more than one-half of the country's hospitals, were situated in the capital. Furthermore, only a fraction of the national budget leaves the department in which Port-au-Prince is located: estimated at around one per cent in 2006 (Development and Civilisations, Lebret-Irfed International Centre and Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute, 2006), increasing to seven per cent in 2019.

Local authorities are supposedly the state's presence in the countryside, yet they are left strapped for cash, unable to provide even basic services to their constituents. For those who choose to enter government posts to help their communities, they are faced with the difficult and time-consuming challenge of outside fundraising or entering into collaborations for which few have the necessary relations.

These histories of exploitation and neglect by both international agencies and the Government of Haiti shaped the precarious state of affairs that existed before the

earthquake and hurricane. Haiti, a small island nation, was ranked as the country most vulnerable to climate change and various other threats, including fragile ecosystems, population density, overstressed water resources, and limited institutional capabilities (Slagle and Rubenstein, 2012). These factors leave rural inhabitants with few options other than migration, tearing them away from their *lakous* (traditional communal kin living configurations with multiple houses built around a yard) and communities in order to *cheche lavi* (search for livelihoods, literally translated as searching for life), in the cities, especially Port-au-Prince.

The postcolonial state

The processes of exclusion, exploitation, and extraction began during the French colonial period (1697–1804) and have persisted to the present day. Following Haiti's independence in 1804, the economic elite and military co-opted the state while attempting to reinstate the plantation system. Newly freed, formerly enslaved people resisted the move by becoming landed peasants, but the patterns of extraction from the peasants and the countryside continued. Rather than direct oppression, the state employed other means, such as exploitative tax policies (Dupuy, 1989; Trouillot, 1990a), and, until 1986, peasants' birth certificates were stamped with the word *paysannes* (peasant) (Dayan, 1995), a French term also used to exclude (DeGraff, 2005; DeJean, 2006); peasants were not even allowed to enter the cities without permission.

French plantations set the precedent for the environmental degradation of the countryside, clear-cutting for export-based, mono-cropped agriculture. What once was rich, fertile land is nowadays depicted frequently as the lands and mountains baring their bones. In addition to the land itself, peasants paid the highest price, as Dupuy (1989, p. 184) notes: 'The market in Haiti has always been the site of struggle to appropriate a larger or lesser part of the total wealth produced by the peasants'. By the turn of the nineteenth century, this struggle was apparent, with Germany controlling 75 per cent of the import market and demonstrating much military might, concerning the US more than the French and the British (Plummer, 1988; Dupuy, 1989). This situation was to change quickly with the arrival of the *USS Washington* in July 1915, giving the US more control of Haiti's wealth, while triggering the centralisation process that would alter national life dramatically (Robleto-Gonzalez, 2012; St. Jacques and Sommers, 2015).

Occupation by the US

The US occupation of Haiti from 1915–34 accorded it a larger share of the import market. In addition, it saw the re-establishment of the *corvée*, a form of forced and unpaid labour, the emptying of the national treasury, and the rewriting of the constitution so that foreigners could own land, for the first time since independence (Renda, 2001; Jean-Baptiste, 2012). US Marines reduced provincial port activities and budgets, while training a modern army with the objective of subduing resistance by those in the countryside. The rural police set up in multiple iterations of

state rural codes were folded into this newly oriented militia (*Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen*, 1991). These acts further invested economic, military, and political power in Port-au-Prince (Schmidt, 1971; Danticat, 2015).

The expanded power of the state, characterised by capital and infrastructure concentrated in the capital, was detrimental to the countryside. The impacts of this neglect were an increasingly impoverished rural population and a barren landscape. This path allowed for the emergence and consolidation of power by a black middle class, leading to the rise of François Duvalier in 1957, who named himself president-for-life in 1964, claiming absolute individual authority. Duvalier completed what the US had started by shutting down the remaining provincial ports and employing systematic violence against his opponents via his feared special operations unit, *Tonton Macoutes* (Ferguson, 1987; Abbott, 1991; Diederich, 2011).

After the death of François Duvalier on 21 April 1971, his son, Jean-Claude, further marginalised the countryside by promoting an export-oriented economy, assembling baseballs, Disney products, and other foreign items. With the countryside neglected, rural inhabitants flocked to the city in the hope of finding work in these factories; as a result, the city's population almost quadrupled (Dupuy, 2010). The factories paid the lowest wages in the hemisphere, forcing many workers to live in what is now called *Cité Soleil*, Haiti's largest shantytown (Beaubien, 2013; Carlson-Robillard, 2015).

Popular demand for decentralisation

In 1987, one year after the people overthrew the 29-year Duvalier dictatorship, more than 90 per cent of voters approved a new constitution. The preamble stipulates that there must be 'concerted action and participation of all the people in major decisions affecting the life of a nation, through effective decentralization'. Article 87-4 states that '[d]ecentralization must be accompanied by deconcentration of public services with delegation of power and industrial decompartmentalisation for the benefit of the departments', whereas Article 217 underlines that the '[t]he finances of the Republic are decentralized'.¹⁰ The constitution provides some basic guidelines as to how decentralisation should happen, yet, in the absence of political will, the mandate to do so was never fully implemented. The regulatory framework was codified in three more laws: the Decentralization Law Framework; the Law on the Commune; and the Law on Municipal Development and Management. None of them have been approved (Smucker, 2000; Robleto-Gonzalez, 2012).

The constitution of 1987 remains intact as the last popular mandate (Deshommes, 2011), but it is still an unfulfilled promise. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate why the social movement that put it forth failed to ensure its implementation, but one should note that the longstanding collusion of foreign and local elites—who benefited from the status quo of a centralised, export-oriented economy—has led to them retaining control of the political process, perpetuating the postcolonial legacy of inequality.

The 'republic of NGOs'

The earthquake in 2010 radically increased the NGO presence in Haiti, with pledges exceeding USD 16 billion. While the country was dubbed the 'republic of NGOs' prior to the earthquake, the phrase became common in its wake, reflecting donor practices (Kristoff and Panarelli, 2010; Klarreich and Polman, 2012). During the emergency phase, decisions were made in the UN Logistics Base (called the LogBase for short). All but two humanitarian 'Clusters' convened their meetings at the LogBase (Klarreich and Polman, 2012; Miles, 2012). Access to the LogBase was granted by UN troops, and Cluster meetings were held in English, '[m]aking it clear to everyone who was envisioned as being part of the process: Haitian people were completely excluded'.¹¹ In effect, the foreign humanitarian apparatus rendered the entire Haitian population and even the government as *moun andeyò*.

In addition to reproducing local and global power dynamics, a critical conversation began to take place outside of Haiti, centring on where the money had gone (see, for example, Harvey, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Ramachandran and Walz, 2012). Initially, relief workers were defensive in their response, attacking individuals who questioned or criticised. Gradually, though, as the effort dragged on with few visible results, more mainstream agencies queried the effectiveness of NGOs, and Bill Clinton published a report on the 'Lessons from Haiti' website in 2012, two years after the earthquake.¹² Three such lessons were: (i) that the humanitarian toolkit, designed with rural settings in mind, was inappropriately adapted to the urban setting of the disaster; (ii) a lack of coordination hampered aid delivery; and (iii) Haiti's weak state rendered aid less effective. The latter was mostly a deflection of responsibility, but people such as Bill Clinton and then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also voiced concern about the role of donors in creating the parallel NGO structure, weakening the government in the first place. These three self-critiques were generalised in the 'Transformative Agenda' of the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee,¹³ which cited its experience in Haiti.

Many analysts went further. Associated Press Correspondent Jonathan Katz (2013) investigated and exposed the UN's role in bringing cholera to Haiti in October 2010, which claimed the lives of almost 9,500 people by January 2017. The UN initially denied the assertion, despite the best epidemiological (Piarroux et al., 2011) and genetic (Hendriksen et al., 2011) evidence pinpointing the source. Katz also joined Organization of American States (OAS) Representative Ricardo Seitenfus (2015) and high-profile Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck (2013) in probing the Clintons' roles in the elections in Haiti. *Assistance Mortelle* (Peck, 2013) focused on many Haitian professionals and their dismay at foreign agencies' lack of respect for Haitian people and their government. Critiques of NGOs reached a peak in 2015 and 2018, respectively, with an exposé of the misuse of funds by the American Red Cross (Elliot and Sullivan, 2015) and a sexual misconduct scandal involving Oxfam GB.

In light of the fact that the UN evaded responsibility for cholera for five years, the organisation was ineffective at raising funds for its prevention and remediation.

Meanwhile, faced with mounting criticism, the international donor and NGO communities were forced to show that they had applied lessons learned, particularly with regard to supporting and working with the Government of Haiti.

Humanitarian aftershocks

The impact on the countryside is rarely mentioned and has been rendered largely invisible in popular discourse, even though, according to a mobile telephone study, an estimated 630,000 people left Port-au-Prince following the earthquake, with more than 110,000 heading to Grand Anse (Bengtsson et al., 2011). Furthermore, a point seldom made, at least to a foreign audience, is how Haitians help each other after a disaster (Lahens, 2010; Montas-Dominique, 2011; Trouillot, 2012).

A comprehensive assessment in Abricots was headed by world-renowned Haitian novelist Jean Claude Fignolé, the mayor at the time. Following the earthquake, the population increased by more than 25 per cent, due to 8,314 returnees (Mairie des Abricots, 2010). Despite the fact that aid had failed to reach the areas to which people had fled, such as the departments of Grand Anse and Nippes, rural residents opened their doors to their fellow Haitians (Schuller, Gebrian, and Lewis, 2019). They welcomed them, housed them, and fed them, stretching the already limited resources of their communities (Jean-Baptiste, 2012). People in Abricots often referred to Port-au-Prince returnees as *reskapes* (escapees) or *dekonm* (rubble)—like so much of the capital had become. Chuckles generally followed, along with silent but collective acknowledgement that these people had actually survived.

International aid did not reach the majority of the people in the countryside. Moreover, the hospitality that rural Haitian communities extended to urban families only exacerbated their plight, making it harder to resist going to Port-au-Prince, where resources were even more intensely concentrated owing to the thousands of NGOs in the city. Although the presence of NGOs has reinforced centralisation throughout history, it was particularly true after the earthquake of 2010.

Aid and politics

According to the principles of the Swiss activist and humanitarian Henry Dunant, aid is supposedly apolitical. It is meant to be neutral, impartial, and independent—the core values of the *Code of Conduct for International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* adopted following the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 (Hilhorst, 2005; Donini, 2012; Acuto, 2014). In reality, however, the nexus between aid and politics is frequently uncomfortably close and complex (Minear, 2012; Smillie, 2012; Terry, 2014). Given the disciplinary functions of humanitarian action, Agier (2006) has referred to a form of ‘humanitarian government’.

This paper discusses first the ways in which aid plays ‘anti-political’ roles, producing the logic of a *leta absan*, an absent state. Next it examines the application of

lessons learned by NGOs in the wake of the earthquake, in what can be called a top-down decentralisation process. As a backdrop to all of this was an ongoing electoral crisis.

Leta absan: the 'anti-politics' of aid

Writing about development agencies in Lesotho, James Ferguson (1990) points out that aid plays 'anti-political' roles, turning the lack of access to necessities into technical failures as opposed to the political decisions of elites. Steven Jackson (2005) describes a pervasive 'non-governmentality', with citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo believing that their welfare is best served by non-governmental actors. Haitian scholars have pushed the conversation further: Sauveur Pierre Etienne (1997) asserts that NGOs weaken the state, brandishing the sword for imperialism, and Janil Lwiji (2009) contends that NGOs represent a different form of government, implanting foreign capital in the Haitian countryside.

The absence of the state in rural Haiti contributed to the vulnerabilities of communities prior to the arrival of Hurricane Matthew in 2016, via the processes of economic, military, and political centralisation. Table 1 shows the top four priority needs in three field sites (Abricots, before and after Matthew, as identified in the surveys administered in mid and late 2016).

The priority needs before Matthew pertain to infrastructure and basic services, the provision of which is generally the responsibility of the state. Interestingly, in all of the initial surveys, food was not a priority need, contrary to familiar foreign tropes of poverty and starvation in the countryside. Only one person in Abricots cited food, as compared to two in Camp Perrin and three in Port Salut.

Two key factors may explain why the need for food was listed so infrequently before Matthew. First, although there was drought throughout Haiti, the departments most affected were Artibonite, Northwest, and Southeast.¹⁴ Second is that the mango season peaks in July and overlaps with the start of the avocado season, both of which contribute to a decrease in hunger and malnutrition. This is when the data were collected. Groups such as the Organization for the Rehabilitation of the

Table 1. Changing priority needs

| Priority | Abricots | | Camp Perrin | | Port Salut | |
|----------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Before Matthew | After Matthew | Before Matthew | After Matthew | Before Matthew | After Matthew |
| 1 | Road | Health | Work | Food | Road | Shelter |
| 2 | Water | Road | Road | Roofing | Water | Food |
| 3 | Work | Food | Other | Work | Electricity | Water |
| 4 | Health | Work | Health | Professional school | Work | Electricity |

Source: authors.

Environment have worked to extend the mango season through the introduction of two additional off-season varieties. Other locally-grown produce sustained South-west communities during that time, such as breadfruit and tubers (which rotted in the weeks following Matthew). The three departments most affected by Matthew were Grand Anse, Nippes, and South, which produced 85 per cent of the country's beans, corn, peas, rice, and sorghum prior to Matthew, as well as almost 40 per cent of its fruit, as noted by the National Coordination of Food Security (CNSA) in 2017 (cited in ACTED, 2017, p. 5).

People reported that the actors most effective in providing assistance to communities were local individuals, associations, or foundations, however they clearly lacked the resources to assist with full recovery. Yet, they were able to conduct rapid needs assessments. For instance, community members in Abricots cleared blocked roads, removing felled trees and other debris. They knew this was a lifeline, permitting outsiders to access the commune and to bring in aid.¹⁵ Such collective action was witnessed too in Camp Perrin and Port Salut, where residents cleaned waterways. Furthermore, community members protected one another from the ongoing rain after the hurricane, especially extremely vulnerable individuals such as the disabled and the elderly. Many households offered shelter to those in need; friends and extended family members assisted others with building temporary shelters.¹⁶ Food was shared with those without it, as well as clothes and shoes. Lastly, a group of youths circulated Camp Perrin, providing emotional support to those who were experiencing intense trauma after the hurricane.

Momentary aid decentralisation: lessons learned?

International humanitarian agencies eager to show that they had learned from their mistakes following the earthquake in 2010 made visible their promises to work with not just the Haitian government, but also with local government officials and emergency operation centres at the departmental and local level. However, they did not change their overall policies and decision-making structures, doing little to nothing to address inequalities furthered by histories of centralisation. The results were predictably messy and ineffective as a consequence. Clusters were renamed 'working groups', and the meetings were localised, taking place in different department capitals, generally in UN offices. Although more effective in assigning territories for distribution, community organisations and the leaders of the most affected communities were still left *andeyò*, or outside of the decision-making process.

Researchers noted that patterns of aid channelled through the local government rarely reached the hands of those in most need. Those situated further outside of town centres, particularly along winding footpaths in the mountains, were in an increasingly precarious position. The impact of the hurricane on communities was directly correlated with their pre-existing vulnerability. Many of them were only accessible on foot or by donkey. Hence, aid was largely distributed through people in positions of power or the local government, who often gave to *moun pa* (their people and/or those who supported them) or *zòn pa* (areas that backed them).

This led to violent conflicts between two political candidates in Grand Anse. After the hurricane, one of these candidates tried to conduct an aid distribution, but clashed with his opponent. Some of the close supporters of the former were shot, and cars, a house, and motorcycles were set on fire. The aid distribution was essentially a turf battle for popularity, meaning ultimately being elected to a government post. Calm returned in 2017 because both now hold political positions, as a deputy and as a senator.

A staff member at the municipal office in one of the field sites parted ways with the mayor, owing to tensions surrounding a housing project of the multiple NGOs. The mayor attempted to allocate a number of houses for the project to his friends and family. Each of those selected already had at least one intact house. The staff member adamantly disagreed with the move, accusing the mayor of 'playing politics' and not providing for those in need.

The two main political factions in Port-Salut each had an elected representative—one the mayor, and the other the deputy—at the national government level. Both cultivated bases of support. The opposition Lavalas Party, of deposed (in a 2004 coup) President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, controlled the main town, whereas President Michel Martelly's ruling 'Tèt Kale'¹⁷ political party (PHTK) controlled the rural section in which the mayor lived (Saint Louis, 2020). Both men identified with delivering particular aid to *zòn pa*—that is, 'their turf' (Joseph, n.d.). In this struggle for power, though, the mayor had the upper hand in two respects. First, by being the executive and having contact with NGOs, he was the one with the power to authorise entry to the commune, leading to deals for the granting of access. In effect, agencies deputised the municipal government in conducting distributions. Second, by being a member of the ruling PHTK, the mayor could wield the tools of the state to destroy the local livelihood of his opponent.

These are just some examples of local government action that caused distrust in various communities. Local opinion is mixed, though, as survey data show that in Port Salut, the community believed that the local authorities lacked the budget to solve problems, and that the state has the resources but not the political will. Apropos of NGOs, they believe that they have the greatest means to resolve problems, but do not have an effective approach.

In Abricots, those surveyed did not understand why NGOs continued to provide *manje sinistre*, or food aid, a month after Matthew. They thought that NGOs should distribute seedlings and seeds so that farmers could be self-sufficient again as quickly as possible. They also underlined that emergency food aid differed from the local palette, and had very little nutritional value, whereas locally produced food was *manje viv* (giving life).¹⁸ Although the local authorities were rated lowest with regard to resolving issues, many reflected fondly on the former mayor, Jean-Claude Fignolé, saying that 'he respected what he said and kept promises'.

In Camp Perrin, while respondents rated NGOs higher than the state in terms of ability to resolve community problems, they rated them lower than the local authorities. The actor that garnered the highest percentage of trust (72 per cent) was

Box 1. Some community suggestions on how to improve aid

- Equitable aid distribution.
- Preventing situations where some groups receive the majority of aid.
- Ending 'fiefdoms'.
- Reconstruction of schools so that children can return to their classes.
- Unblocking of roads.
- State assistance to help people return to normal life as quickly as possible.
- Creation of a collaborative spirit.
- NGOs should seek out community leaders and local groups for the distribution of aid.
- State system for the reconstruction of houses that takes in to account the entire community and meets building standards.
- The state should not wait for a disaster before acting.
- The state should assist parents as well as help to generate local resources.
- The state should rethink and alter its behavior and stop being beholden to aid.

Source: authors.

people in the community, who resolve their problems by collaborating with their neighbours. Respondents criticised the aid that arrived for being poorly distributed, not what the population really needed, not sufficient, and not going to those in greatest need. Of those surveyed, 84 per cent said that their area did not benefit from the NGO/humanitarian aid. It was noted that the community became more dependent than before.

Clearly there were more lessons to be learned by the international community, as well as by the state and the local authorities. Box 1 sets out some of the recommendations of the community. As this list illustrates, local residents have nuanced perspectives on humanitarian aid, its effectiveness, and the bodies involved, including political entities. The next section examines how these different actors played politics with one another and the aid.

Playing politics: elections

Michel Martelly, better known at the time as 'Sweet Micky', was quoted in 1997 as saying: 'First thing, after I establish my power, which would be very strong and necessary, I would close that congress thing. Le Chambre de Deputés. Le Senat' (Ackerman, 1997). The popular Konpa singer's rise to the top and his ability to complete his plan to garner more power seemed far-fetched and almost unimaginable at that time.

By the end of 2010, 11 months after the earthquake, with millions of dollars already invested and billions more in the pipeline, the US had much at stake. Bill Clinton co-chaired the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission, which made decisions about the international aid. Often called 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2007), many who benefited from contracts or funding in the aftermath of the disaster were

linked to the Clintons by being donors to the Clinton Foundation or members of the Clinton Global Initiative (see, for example, Mosk et al., 2016).

According to the Provisional Electoral Counsel (CEP), Martelly received one per cent fewer votes than Jude Célestin, the protégé of outgoing President René Prével, in the first round of elections in 2010, putting him in third place and thus excluding him from the runoff. However, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, with the support of the so-called Core Group of the European Union (EU), the OAS, and the US, intervened to reverse the outcome, advancing Martelly to the second round (Peck, 2013; Johnston, 2015; Seitenfus, 2015). US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice threatened to cut aid to pressure the Government of Haiti to accept the intervention, even though the country was still reeling from the devastating earthquake. More than one million people were still living in the internally displaced person camps at the time.

Runoff polls were held on 20 March 2011. Martelly, who joined late with an unknown 'Peasants' Response' party, easily won the second round, which saw less than one-third of eligible voters take part. In light of his assisted accession, his administration was called upon to support foreign initiatives; Clinton's motto of 'building back better' in sync with Martelly's 'open for business' maxim. Unwavering foreign support, despite warnings of erratic behaviour (Johnston, 2016a), enabled Martelly to consolidate power via an unconstitutional decree issued on 18 February 2012. The decree deposed elected mayors throughout the country, replacing them with interim mayors who were members of his PHTK party. A few right-wing mayors who passed a loyalty test were able to stay in position.

Martelly's refusal to hold elections allowed him to fulfil his own prophecy on the five-year anniversary of the earthquake: parliamentary terms expired, and he began to rule by decree. Each decree and administrative order that he issued over the next year was illegal, largely benefitting himself or those loyal to him (Charles, 2016). When faced with a similar situation in 1999, the international community froze aid; this time, overseas agencies continued to support the administration.

Foreign strong-arming in 2010–11 led to a similar shadow being cast over the 2015–16 elections. The first round of presidential polls in October 2015 was marred by fraud and irregularities, including 915,675 *mandatè*, accredited representatives of the 54 candidates, casting 59 per cent of the ballots, some more than once (National Lawyers Guild, International Association of Democratic Lawyers, and Haiti Support Group, 2016). The results benefited Jovenel Moïse of the PHTK, the preferred candidate of Martelly.

Despite the clear warning signs, the Core Group continued to support the Martelly administration and the elections. They even certified the results while a Haitian-led investigation into fraud was pending; the EU viewed them as being 'nearly perfectly normal', whereas outgoing US Ambassador to Haiti Pamela White's assessment was that they were 'not perfect, but acceptable' (Concannon, 2015). Likely on their minds was the rapidly approaching conclusion of Martelly's term in office on 7 February 2016. A last-minute accord was signed on the eve of his departure by Martelly himself and by the Presidents of the Senate and the Lower Chamber of

Deputies, Jocelerme Privert and Cholzer Chancy, respectively, making Senate President Jocelerme Privert Haiti's Interim President. Privert—Minister of Interior under Aristide, responsible for the national police among other institutions—was sworn in as Interim President on 14 February 2016, and charged with organising Haiti's twice-postponed presidential and partial legislative run-offs.

The Independent Electoral Assessment and Verification Commission issued its findings on 9 May 2016, recommending the cancellation of the presidential elections and part of the parliamentary polls. Privert's CEP obliged and annulled them (Charles, 2016). Despite threats by the Core Group to withhold funding, and the US retracting USD 2 million (Johnston, 2016b), the interim government held its ground. Faced with foreign intransigence, Privert emphasised that the USD 55 million required for the elections would be a 'priority project', self-financed from the tax coffers (VOA, 2016). Then Hurricane Matthew made landfall.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the central government demanded local coordination of incoming aid (Charles, 2016), but its actions largely perpetuated disregard of the countryside. Very few representatives visited the areas impacted most. Privert accompanied US Ambassador to Haiti Peter F. Mulrean on a flight that delivered the first shipment of humanitarian supplies from the US (US Mission Haiti, 2016). Little was done by the state after this initial, highly visible activity.

Abricots youth leader Jamesky Blaise underscored that the 'only time [presidents] come to the countryside is when they are campaigning. They never return after they are in power'. In October 2016, days after Matthew, Blaise led a commune-wide assessment, partnering with a longstanding local foundation and the mayor's office. The appraisal was comprehensive, outlining needs and resources unique to the four communal sections, serving as a guide for any incoming aid. It was also circulated to the working groups, but what arrived did not match the needs outlined in the evaluation, nor did it reach those most affected.

In the meantime, the capital was much more focused on the upcoming elections. In South province, 70 per cent of the voting centres were unusable, and 18 per cent inaccessible. In Grand Anse, observers were only able to visit 26 of 106 voting centres, 23 of which were damaged. Schools that were still standing served as emergency shelters for some 175,000 people (Charles, 2016).

The US opted to provide some aid for the elections given the hurricane, stating repeatedly that they wanted them to take place sooner rather than later (Johnston, 2016b). With Privert having already extended his 120-day mandate once, the US was likely fearful of the unknown. Jovenel Moïse's spokesperson, Renald Lubrice, railed that Privert would take the opportunity to postpone indefinitely (Charles and Chang, 2016), implying that he would try to hold on to power. Despite a leaked OAS report stating that 'it is clear it will be hard' (Charles, 2016) to hold elections soon, significant national and international pressure resulted in the date being set for just over one month later, on 20 November.

The polls on 20 November displaced again those in temporary shelters, which served as voting centres. Other polling booths were under tarps, with seating provided

outside by felled trees; one was even stationed in a cockfighting ring. Furthermore, people had to trek across swollen rivers and through swathes of mud, owing to flash flooding due to ongoing rain. Nonetheless, the elections went ahead despite the extreme conditions.

As Blaise predicted, the two presidential frontrunners materialised following the hurricane. While Célestin had the LeDigue Bridge rebuilt quickly, 'Jovenel' packed barges with goods, such as corrugated metal roofing, and food aid and water were packaged in bags with his name and political party emblazoned on them. Jovenel's aid distributions were much more visible, although they never reached those in greatest need. The barges largely landed in the centre of towns, where the least damage had occurred. Some beneficiaries even attempted to sell to those who were most desperate.¹⁹ The aid created competition and further fractured a community with once strong collective and equitable principles.

Not surprisingly due to his backing and visible post-Matthew campaign, Jovenel won the ballot, receiving 55 per cent of the votes. However, the turnout was the lowest in the country's history: 21 per cent.²⁰ In second place, Célestin received less than 20 per cent of the votes cast. Moïse Jean Charles, in third, got less than 10 per cent. Even though many acknowledged that the aid disseminated by Jovenel was clearly a campaign ploy, he was one of the only representatives of central or local government that supplied anything.

As is evident from this discussion, aid was a central weapon in election struggles; as the former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, often observed: 'all politics is local'. Other scholars have noted the role that NGOs play in clientelism (Petras, 1997; Dahou, 2003; Wallace, 2003). As these scholars argue, NGO aid is frequently used to bolster local elite groups and officials, which this paper demonstrates in the context of Haiti. Given the confluence of discourses and humanitarian agencies wanting to learn from past mistakes, the response to Hurricane Matthew, however much smaller, became a timely and strategic instrument of various political agendas. Aid was certainly playing politics.

Prognosis

This paper suggests, like others before it, that the relationship between disaster assistance and politics is uncomfortably close. In the case of Hurricane Matthew in the Grand Anse and South departments of Haiti, presidential frontrunners harnessed humanitarian aid as an election campaign strategy. The international community, specifically the Core Group, has utilised aid to achieve the desired results. This was exemplified with the national elections before the hurricane made landfall. NGOs facilitated distributions that reinforced 'fiefdoms' for rurally-based political actors, rarely providing for the most vulnerable. All of these dynamics compel a deeper structural interrogation. They continue to adhere to similar patterns shaped by a postcolonial legacy dividing urban and rural Haiti, and they are complicated by

international interventions that continue to weaken the state. The complicity of the state in advancing foreign interests frequently has dictated whether or not the international community intervenes.

The failure of aid delivery appears to serve multiple purposes in promoting foreign economic interests. Notably, Haiti remains a 'failed state'. Similar to Clinton's statement after the earthquake in 2010 about the problem of a weak state, the botched distribution of localised aid deputised through rural political actors reinforces that trope, shifting the focus from foreign violations of sovereignty. In addition, the influx of aid creates a client state, what Haitian activists, intellectuals, and aid professionals call a *leta restavèk*, a child-servant state. The latter owes its existence to foreign aid and thus is more likely to respond favourably to requests from former colonial and imperial powers that benefit foreign capital. The inequitable distribution of aid in the countryside continues to chip away at collaborative and collectivist communities already exhausted by the postcolonial inheritance of state neglect. Furthermore, this paper makes a case for the need to understand the history of centralisation in Haiti and its urban and rural impacts if the intention of interventions in post-disaster settings is to provide accountable and effective assistance. Simply working with political actors outside of Port-au-Prince, a lesson learned, does not account for the detrimental ramifications of centralisation processes that span more than a century. Perhaps working with local political actors was only performative? The end results of momentarily decentralising aid and cooperating with local government representatives deputised as distribution mechanisms remained ineffective, while leaving decision-making processes opaque and inequalities intact. The form of temporary decentralisation of aid in the post-Matthew landscape ignored a past that created the present inequalities and further contributed to the fragmentation of rural communities and heightened the pressure to migrate to the cities and break ties with the land, essentially neutralising ongoing rural resistance.

As expressed in the constitution of 1987, decentralisation was codified in *collectivités territoriales*. These territorial collectives are clearly defined autonomous geographical and political units, with elected governments, aimed at transferring decision-making to smaller administrative bodies. Governance processes were deliberately collectivised, with mayors sharing power with the deputies and local community councils. This process of decision-making requires and produces dialogue, and hence leads to negotiations and opportunities for transparency. Foreign actors, humanitarian or otherwise, are at best ignorant of this local power structure, reproducing and empowering a neo-feudal system with mayors and other local state representatives becoming all-powerful.

Until this collectivist vision is implemented, disaster response—even one that may appear to be 'decentralised'—will continue to produce local, disarticulated 'fiefdoms'. International humanitarian actors, who reversed their previous approach of state avoidance in the wake of the earthquake, and tried, more or less sincerely, to implement a decentralised response, nonetheless contributed to the *archipelisation* of rural communities, particularly in the department of Grand Anse. Missing from the

vision of decentralisation was this collectivism, discussion, and negotiation, activating community councils at the most grassroots level. Also absent was inclusion in accountability and transparency mechanisms. Lessons learned from this shadow disaster, however dimly visible, should centre on this more specific vision of decentralisation embodied in the governance framework of Haiti. Genuine efforts to change humanitarian practice would start with altering the reward structure. Disaster response that concentrates on *moun an deyò*, the most excluded and marginalised of people, requires addressing directly the power structures that maintain these realities.

This paper has explored the particularities of Haiti, understanding the historical forces that shape contemporary rural society. Yet, it is not arguing for exceptionalism here (Trouillot, 1990b; Clitandre, 2011). The potential lessons concerning spotlighting *moun an deyò* are applicable to other impoverished postcolonial societies, as demonstrated by the impacts of Hurricane Maria (September 2017) on Puerto Rico. They are relevant too with regard to the increasing inequality in Houston, Texas, US, following Hurricane Harvey in August 2017; the most affected were the 'frontline communities'. All of these examples highlight the dire need to focus on the marginalised and excluded, establishing a potentially more sustainable post-disaster response and indeed a more just post-disaster society. That truly would 'build back better'.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the following research assistants: Roseline Lamartinière, Nancy Sherline Marie Saint Louis, Verdy Renois, and Elkins Voltaire. This paper is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under a CAREER grant (number: 1455142) and a RAPID grant (number: 1722749). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For more information, see <https://www.clintonfoundation.org/haiti-building-back-better> (last accessed on 21 January 2020).
- ² Another major event, Hurricane Cleo, skirted the coast of Haiti in 1964.
- ³ This was also conveyed in personal communications with residents of Abricots in the days preceding Matthew, as well as with others in Paillant and Les Cayes in late 2018 and 2019.

- ⁴ Personal communication with members of peasant organisations and subsistence farmers in Abricots and conversations with rural partner organisations of the Lambi Fund of Haiti.
- ⁵ Personal communication with RNNDH departmental network members in November 2016—not included in RNDDH (2016).
- ⁶ Personal communication with RNNDH departmental network members in November 2016—not included in RNDDH (2016).
- ⁷ In addition to the AJVPA and FPDI (2016) assessment, this was confirmed by many residents of Abricots in personal communications.
- ⁸ The Creole pig population was almost entirely eradicated following a plan of the United States for International Development, PEPPADEP (Programme pour l'éradication de la peste porcine africaine et pour le développement de l'élevage porcin; Program to Eradicate African Swine Fever and to Develop Pig Production). Some authors (see, for example, Bell, 2013) argue that it was a deliberate strategy to make Haiti's economy more dependent on foreign imports, particularly US agribusiness.
- ⁹ For more information, see the rural and urban population data available on the websites of the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs and the World Bank: <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/publications/files/wup2014-report.pdf> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS> (last accessed on 29 January 2020).
- ¹⁰ For more information, see <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Haiti/haiti1987.html> (last accessed on 29 January 2020).
- ¹¹ Interview with a Haitian aid professional, Pétion-Ville, July 2012
- ¹² For more information, see United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti (2011).
- ¹³ For more information, see <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda> (last accessed on 29 January 2020).
- ¹⁴ For more information, see <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/dr-2015-000091-hti> (last accessed on 30 January 2020).
- ¹⁵ Based on personal communication with community members two days after the hurricane.
- ¹⁶ This was seen in Pondye in the second section of Abricots. In addition, the RNDDH delegation that spoke with community members in Les Irois witnessed the use of the *klissage* technique of weaving together pieces of wood to make walls.
- ¹⁷ Meaning bald headed in Haitian Creole.
- ¹⁸ People in Dejeume told a colleague who was in Abricots a few months after the hurricane that they did like the lentils that were in the pre-packed meals, but not the rice.
- ¹⁹ Personal communications with residents of Abricots after the hurricane in 2016 and leading up to the elections.
- ²⁰ For more information see the following blog: <http://haitielection2015.blogspot.com/> (last accessed on 31 January 2020).

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