Special Report

Haiti - Five Years after the Earthquake: How to Ensure Sustainable Development?

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ABSTRACT

This short report provides a personal insight into the work of public health non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Haiti, and highlights some important issues in the organisation of the NGO response. In particular, the harmful effects of disorganised NGO responses and the need to ensure sustainability to any projects put in place are explored.

Five years after the earthquake in Haiti, donor funding has started to wane and it seems there are only a few plans to ensure the sustainability of development projects put in place since 2010. Partnering with local organisations and training local staff are some of the ways smaller organisations are addressing the issue of sustainability; larger NGOs must find similar ways to hand-over to local organisations.

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OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

As we gaze down at the yellow, turbid water that has been brought up from one of the recently dug wells, I begin to realise the reality of the widespread chaos and disorganisation of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) response in Haiti. I have been volunteering with a small NGO for three months now and on my first visit to Haiti, we are trying to determine why one of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects has been stalled for the last six months. Finally, by visiting the site itself and talking to the project supervisor face to face, we have discovered the wells have been dug on land with no water. The land assessment, which had been assigned to the Haitian director who receives a substantial paycheck every month, had never been done. Instead he had simply talked to the people living there, who assured him that there was water.

This is not an uncommon sequence of events in Haiti, where, after decades of misspent foreign aid, the national psyche has become increasingly individualist and survivalist. In a country that has been pledged £5.6bn since the earthquake in 2010 but benefited from only a fraction of this sum [1,2], it is seen as the norm to take advantage of any free aid where you can. However, five years after the earthquake, donor enthusiasm is starting to wane. Ninety one of the 250 cholera treatment facilities closed in 2014 [3], and countless other NGOs have left the country as donor funding has been cut or shifted towards other global crises. Whereas previously working for an NGO was a relatively lucrative business for the average Haitian, salaries are being reduced and positions are being cut. Despite this natural “coming to an end”, it seems there are only a few plans to ensure the sustainability of development projects put in place since 2010.

If it ain’t broke, build a new one!

While the importance of aid sustainability may seem obvious to the outsider, it is not so appealing for those Haitians who have spent most of their lives working with NGOs. For the Haitian director of the NGO I am volunteering for, sustainability means an end to his comfortable income. Hence, he is firmly against any sort of community-training plans we suggest. When we explain that the funding is reducing as donors lose interest in Haiti, he unreservedly replies, “someone else will donate”.

This unshakeable belief that aid will continue proves to be a frustrating barrier for those in the NGO sector who, intent on not letting hard-earned gains in Haiti go to waste, are trying to plan for sustainability around the already apparent effects of donation “fatigue”. On a visit to a rural school, which has reportedly poor WASH infrastructure requiring NGO assistance, we arrive to find, somewhat confusingly, an untouched new flush-latrine block complete with a handwashing station. On further enquiry it becomes apparent that they were installed less than a year ago by a large, foreign government-funded group, who also installed a water pump (made up of parts unfamiliar to Haitian mechanics), which promptly broke after the group left. Subsequently, the flush-latrines could not be used, the taps of the handwashing station were removed and the three backup generators for the now broken pump were never turned on. The headmistress concludes that new latrine blocks are needed. Why fix something that has previously been unreliable, when you can replace it with something new? And because this also comfortably fits the donor’s demand for commodity-driven results, absurdly, this often happens.

Developing local infrastructure through partnerships

Fortunately, there are a handful of NGOs that are addressing the issue of sustainability. One example is a faith-based organisation that is currently funding a $2m project aimed at assessing current WASH infrastructure in schools and improving it using local mechanics with the support and input of the schools themselves. As opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach, projects will be tailored to the schools. For example, if a school already has running water, WASH programming may be introduced to improve the motivation of the teachers and directors who control the budget for soap and other WASH commodities. In addition, focus groups have been conducted with directors, teachers, children and parents. Based on the discussions, the schools with clear motivation...
have been chosen to be the focus of the project, as these are more likely to sustain benefits from the project for a longer time. While this “aim for sustainability” approach may seem idealist, by placing it as a priority it is hoped that at least part of this sentiment will be put into action rather than remain on paper, a process that has sadly been neglected in much of the aid work conducted in Haiti to date.

Another way of introducing sustainability is to train local staff and work with local agencies. While this approach is more time consuming and challenging, it ensures the longevity of the project while benefiting the local economy. One well-established NGO dedicated to health service improvement in Haiti, partner with the Ministry of Health when establishing new clinics so that when they are ready to hand-over, the government can continue to run them. While the international community remains suspicious of corruption rumours associated with the government, it has also been noted that many corrupt NGOs have also benefitted from free reign without regulation [4]. These public-private partnerships are a way of holding both sides to account. Partnering with local civil society organisations is also a useful way to create an environment for future sustainability. For example, the WASH NGO I am volunteering for partners with local Rotary clubs. Their focus is chlorinating water supplies, thereby protecting users against waterborne diseases such as cholera. Once the chlorinator system is put in place, the process is simple and can be managed by technicians elected by the local community, supervised by the local Rotary club. These community workers also set the price of the water so that funds can be generated to buy more chlorine. In this way the community has complete autonomy and self-regulation, thus ensuring funds are not squandered by one person.

**Novel approaches to health service delivery are needed**

In other areas of health infrastructure, it is not as easy to introduce sustainability. Health services remain privatised in Haiti and NGO-funding is patchy. “USAID used to fund a malnutrition program in this area but then they left and we had to pick up the pieces,” says Jess, an American working for a nutrition program in and around Port-au-Prince. At one time all children with malnutrition in this area were treated for free, but now only those with “severe malnutrition with complications” receive funding for treatment at the local hospital, sponsored by another NGO. Those without complications, or “moderate” malnutrition would be left to fund their own treatment unless the nutrition program Jess works for stepped in. The clinic uses donated “Plumpynut”, a product designed to treat malnutrition which clearly is only sustainable as long as the donors keep funding it.

However the group is also combatting malnutrition by running a prevention programme, which is completely run by Haitian community health workers. The concept is simple: mothers with malnourished children learn from mothers with healthy children in their own community. The local health worker, trained by the NGO, brings a whole group of mothers together to learn about nutrition and cooking, using the mother of the healthy children as an example.
This “positive deviant” approach is low-cost, local and sustainable for as long as the community health worker continues to practise. In this way, malnutrition in Haiti may be addressed without sending huge containers of donated products.

![Tent camp erected during the emergency earthquake response remains inhabited five years later](image)

These small but important projects are leading the way in ensuring that gains in Haiti are sustained for future generations to come. They empower local people who are determined to survive by any means possible following the trauma of the earthquake and subsequent cholera epidemic. Smaller, targeted projects also have the flexibility to be adaptable so that if one approach cannot be adopted in a particular community, it can be changed and molded to a more acceptable and therefore sustainable approach. Sustainability cannot be enforced in a one-size-fits-all package. Larger NGOs need to find a way to adapt services and train Haitian staff so that when they do eventually hand-over, development projects can be sustained. Only then can we confidently say that the donation of aid has been successful in Haiti.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author is an honorary volunteer for a WASH NGO.

**REFERENCES**