



Recovery, Reconstruction and Renewal: What it Takes to Build Back Better in Haiti

An Event Marking the Third Anniversary of the January 12, 2010 Earthquake

Co-hosted by:

*The Comparative Urban Studies Project and the Latin American Program of the Wilson Center
and the Pan American Development Foundation*

SETTING THE CONTEXT: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Judith Hermanson

Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer
Pan American Development Foundation

I would like to add my words to those of Blair and extend to you all a warm welcome. And to thank you for coming to what I think and very much hope will be a productive series of discussions at this important historical moment. And my great thanks also to the Woodrow Wilson Center for co-hosting this event with the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) and their collaboration. It is a pleasure to be working with Blair and his team. And it is an exceptional opportunity to holding this dialogue as we look forward, beyond reconstruction to renewal in Haiti at the Wilson Center for International Scholars, which is dedicated to open dialogue and actionable ideas. Today, we hope to bring forth both.

Our distinguished presenters today are policy makers and practitioners. We look forward to hearing the perspectives of the Governments of Haiti and the United States, the regional perspective of the Organization of American States which has been very engaged in Haiti following the earthquake in 2010, the perspective of civil society organizations implementing programs on the ground and those that you all may advance during our discussion sessions.

Three years ago on Saturday, a huge earthquake devastated Haiti. To get us all on the same page, the 7.0 magnitude earthquake caused the death of more than a quarter million people, the injury of 300,000, the displacement of over 600,000 people and the destruction of much of Port-au-Prince, with damage estimated at almost \$15 billion. The earthquake jarred an already vulnerable economy, destroyed infrastructure, and shook the government, literally and figuratively, to its foundations.

And then there is the less visible cost. Not the stuff of headlines, it is important also to remember that the lives of countless people were inalterably changed in many ways through loss and grief and changed opportunities. So, when we think of and talk about the earthquake and the challenge of “reconstruction,” it is important also to remember the human face of it all.

As the *New York Times*, cited by Blair, and many other publications have noted: Billions of dollars in aid were promised at the time of the earthquake. Billions have indeed been delivered. But billions have not materialized. Is this the reason that things are not yet “fixed”? I do not know, but perhaps expectations were not correctly framed to begin with.

Port-au-Prince in 2010 had established urban patterns. It was not then a robust urban system – not having kept pace with its huge growth over the past decade or more. In important physical ways, the past patterns cannot be ignored. Nor can the habits and preferences of the people who inhabit it. So putting on the back of reconstruction the reconfiguration of an entire urban area may have been unrealistic. But it is important to ask also what about moving forward? How does “building back better” fit into that framework? Certainly, there are improved seismically resistant construction techniques, employment and income generation opportunities, skills training availability, opportunities for greater societal cohesion through “bottom up” approaches and community engagement, and the increasing availability of secure housing. All of these are part of “better.” And they are encouraging.

I will close by saying that it is important to remember at least three things at this three year anniversary:

- While much remains to be done, many important things have been accomplished. Let us not fall into the trap of bemoaning what has not occurred at the expense of celebrating what has.
- The challenges of reconstruction and renewal are not only “engineering” or construction problems; they are also profoundly human problems with all the complexity that this implies.
- Hope, belief in the future by the Haitian people, and the commitment of the Government and other leaders to finding practical approaches to yield near term and broad based economic benefits are crucial to “building back better.”

PADF has been working uninterruptedly in Haiti for 33 years. Always in partnership with the people, civil society and government. On this third anniversary of the earthquake, as we look forward, it is our continuing hope and I think that of Haiti’s many friends, in tribute to those who remain and in honor of those who perished, that the “better” will include broader transformational initiatives as well. We have deep faith that the resilience of the Haitian people will prevail and that their leadership and the nations of the world will keep faith with them. We pledge our assistance to the best of our abilities.