Two Tales: One Story

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On January 12th, I was in Port-au-Prince with four of my US students. At 4:53 p.m. local time, the earth trembled under Haiti's most densely populated region for what seemed like an interminably long 35 seconds. While I was conducting a research seminar at INURED's headquarter in Delmas 83, my US students together with their Haitian peers from INURED were meeting with a group of youth leaders of Cite Soleil's Community Forum to launch a new initiative when the ground tore beneath them. As night fell, I struggled to comprehend what was happening as the air filled with cries, chants, and ominous silence. The students and the youth leaders were unharmed. The next morning, on foot, I took the US students and some other visitors from the States to safety inside the US Embassy. Along the way, there lay the signs of Haiti's devastation: roads blocked–by debris bodies and limbs. Twenty hours into the earthquake, there was no response and no communication. Not from government authorities or international agencies. The absence of the Haitian public institutions was oppressive. And when the president finally spoke, his first and only words to the nation were: "Even I am homeless."

I later rented the services of two motorcyclists to take me and two of INURED's students to a tour of the city. We kept surveying human sufferings and the spectacle of local solidarity among the most affected, crippled, and "inaccessible" areas in the shanties and neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince for five consecutive days. Seven days into the earthquake, the day I came back to the US, my students and I bared witness of human devastation and loss and despair; decomposing bodies and improvised mass grave, while international solidarity and emergency aid were pouring into the airport. Except for solidarity among local neighbors, there was no response and no communication. Not from government authorities or international agencies. Four weeks had passed now, I return to Haiti. A plethora of international aid agencies and NGOs have already started to solidify their operations in most of the affected areas while local solidarity and initiatives faded away…

The incomplete tales I narrate below extract two (un)related dynamisms that speak to 1) where to "Retrieve the Wisdom of Those in Need" and 2) what happens when societal fragility hampers "Community Healing and Engagement in Times of Disaster."

1. **Building Community Participation through Research in Extreme Fragility from the Ground Up: the Cité Soleil Community Forum**

The community of Cité Soleil lies on the outskirts of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. With a population estimated at 350,000 people, Cité Soleil is the crucible of Haiti's condition. Residents face a grim reality of suffering, neglect, and endure "serial disasters," structural violence, and armed conflicts. For the last two decades, this highly marginalized community has epitomized the face of suffering in Haiti. Between 1986 and 2009, Cité Soleil has been a constant site of struggle, political violence, serial disasters, resistance, and oppression. Yet, international organizations intervened on each occasion of crisis with international aid.

The United Nations intervention since 2004 (MINUSTAH) attempted to secure a space for dialogue between factions in "territories" controlled by gangs and mitigation of violent conflicts. But, international relief efforts have fallen short of engaging the communities in their initiatives. The poorly coordinated wielding of international forces in the community has undermined the local power to create initiatives for positive change. This stagnant reality was recognized as manifestly dangerous in such a fragile situation. The community's frustration threatened the peace, tempting a regression into unproductive violence. This looming risk would grow if the underlying issues at stake in the community were not addressed.

Driven by the fierce urgency of the situation, The Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED) began, in June 2007, to help facilitate the creation of a pathway for reconciliation among the divided factions within Cité Soleil. The Institute was conceived to provide an institutional framework for participatory research in order to map local assets, and identify ways to engage community members and their organizations in addressing challenges to civic engagement, educational, socioeconomic, and political transformation in Haiti. The central strategy of the Institute is the use of participatory community based research to help generate the knowledge necessary to address these issues while engaging the community in the production and use of this knowledge.

From this position, INURED saw a research diagnostic of Cité Soleil as a potential first step towards healing the sharp divisions resulted from the unending political crisis in Haiti. The Institute imagined that a clearer understanding of the situation could be gained by systematic participatory research on the availability and accessibility of resources and services—including water, education, the justice system, security, health care, and the market economy.

After six months of sustained engagement, community based associations and local leaders became receptive to this approach to generating useful information about their socioeconomic condition. Consequently, in November 2007, they started the process of forming an advisory committee for the Institute's proposed community diagnostic study and proceeded to consult the various blocks of the community about the project. On March 28 and 29, 2008 a two-day community meeting addressed both the viability of the idea and the logistics of the project. From this meeting a consensus emerged regarding critical elements of the project. A further objective arose from this community process,

namely that the research diagnostic should also evaluate the role of international organizations in the lives of the people who live in the community.

The March 28-29 meeting revealed that people believed participation in such a project held the potential to foster the development of institutions for healing. The advisory committee, whose members were representative of all the 14 neighborhoods of Cité Soleil, determined that 56 selected community researchers (all of whom were high school graduates or enrolled in University, many of whom were studying the social sciences, and were residents of Cité Soleil) and 14 community advisors would be trained by the Institute during a two weeks seminar. Training focused on research methods, data recording, challenges of research in Cité Soleil and safety issues. The intense fragmentation of Cité Soleil that had developed in the aftermath of gang warfare posed a major hurdle for the team. To minimize risks and facilitate communication, it was resolved that all community researchers would cover each neighborhood as a team.

At the end of March/beginning of April, the implementation of the study began. Various universities, including the University of Connecticut's Center for Health, Intervention and Prevention, University of Miami, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Federal do Rio, provided senior researchers or graduate students to assist in the process, including instrument design, data management, and data analysis. Ethnographic data, survey data, and geographical data were all gathered and analyzed by the team of community and INURED researchers. On May 31, 2008, the preliminary results were presented to the representatives of 14 neighborhoods/territories in Cité Soleil in a formal meeting. These representative included neighborhood associations, churches, vodoun priests, school teachers, the local elected officials, and NGOs, among others.

- ✓ Presented with concrete data around which to focus community discussion, new questions emerged from the community, most prominently:
- ✓ What will happen now?
- ✓ What sort of civil institutions and grassroots networks are most urgently needed to provide a stable framework for community life, and how can residents begin to construct them?
- ✓ How does one begin to think about constructing local democracy in a community severely impacted by authoritarian rules?
- ✓ How can local citizens generate a model for democratic practice that is rooted in their daily lives and local needs, in an environment characterized by imposed foreign development models and ideas?

It became clear to participants in this challenging and spirited process that a space for dialogue was needed that could engage the various neighborhoods of Cité Soleil and the various elements and organizations operating within each of the neighborhoods, including the mayor's office, other local elected officials, and international organizations. The hope expressed by community members was that a space for dialogue could be created as a mechanism to monitor activities in Cité Soleil and to prevent, resolve, and transform community conflicts. Further, such a space could serve as a foundation for the creation of an agenda for community development to complement and aid local officials,

national government, and international organizations engaged in the development discussion.

On October 17-18, 2008, grassroots organizations involved in the initiative held a two-day meeting to create a provisional structure for a forum for discussion of community development, hereafter referred to as the Forum. This Forum has served as a critical tool that leads participants to take ownership of the initiative. Between October 2008 and May 2009 the provisional Directorate of the Forum (the elected leadership body since October 18, 2008) has been working block by block and in every neighborhood in Cité Soleil in order to extend the base of the initiative and thereby reinforce its legitimacy within the community. This is the effort that has been conducive to the birth of the Forum.

The history of violence and disorganization in Cité Soleil is staggering. Still, grassroots leaders and organizations hope to build democratic institutions, even in the most trying of circumstances. For example, youth, entrepreneurial and women's organizations are striving to find alternative ways of living and finding meaning in life for people in the community. For these grassroots community leaders who are attempting to build a peaceful and active civil society, however, the challenges are daunting.

The lack of an enduring, stable state apparatus continues to inhibit the formation of a civil society capable of defending the interests of the most vulnerable community members. In Cité Soleil, the local and national governments have had neither the capacity to provide basic social services nor the means to maintain the basic socio-political order upon which people, especially youth, can imagine and construct a vision of new possibilities and a future of opportunity.

A long tradition of dictatorship and crushing inequality in the country has made it extremely difficult if not impossible for community leaders to build strong, local social movements and democratic institutions.

Haiti relies for social and economic relief on the programs of a diverse patchwork of foreign institutions, international aid organizations, and philanthropic groups that operate in the absence of a coherent nation-state structure. The resulting multiple agendas for social, economic, political, and environmental policy are discordant and incoherent. One consequence is that social and economic decisions often are made outside of Haiti itself, commonly with little or no input from the local communities that will be directly affected. For Cité Soleil residents, the lack of voice in critical decisions that shape their daily lives keeps them from having a stake in the development projects recently or currently being implemented. This state of affairs also perpetuates a situation in which local government cannot effectively respond to the expressed and pressing needs of suffering communities. The community participatory study revealed, in fact, that despite the countless projects currently being undertaken, community members feel that very little improvement has taken place in their precarious conditions.

This is the set of conditions that inspired grassroots leaders to come together to create a Community Forum for Cité Soleil. The following objectives were established by the Forum:

- Channel the voice of community members so that they can make themselves heard by local, national, and international agencies, and governmental, and non-governmental institutions
- Generate a hierarchy of priorities based on the local population's expressed and locally validated grievances and needs.
- Make these priorities the basis for systematic community programs to be implemented by prevailing institutions, with ongoing and direct input from and participation by local residents (as program planners and implementers, not just as recipients of program "benefits").
- Constitute an entity to provide local oversight and ongoing evaluation of the execution of new and existing development programs, and to serve as a permanent conduit for input from the community.

The Forum was conceived as an institution to strengthen civil society by including and giving a voice to local associations and initiatives with the expectation of positive actions on the part of local government, international interventionists, and charitable organizations. Further, because it derives its authority from the people who live in Cité Soleil, the Forum creates a fully legitimate space for negotiation. The Forum especially serves the goal of nonviolent transformation to produce new realities with new potentialities. In the context of human misery and poverty in the community, the Forum emerged as a beacon of emerging hope focused on healing fragmented communities. In this, the Forum stands as a force for freeing the community from the stranglehold of polarizing social hatred and represents the possibility of reinvigorating a paralyzed condition. By defining new terms of social dialogue, the Forum is helping to build resilience in the face of desperation, to temper dangerous urgencies, and to channel the community's collective powers toward building new institutions.

But the painful lines of division extend outward beyond Cité Soleil, fragmenting the entire nation. Divisions between rural and urban, Port-au-Prince and the rest of the country, and upper and lower sectors of the dominant class hierarchy have all been exacerbated by intense mutual demonization. The events that precipitated the most recent international intervention only served to worsen this social fragmentation. As the Forum unveils new hope for Cité Soleil, it might also prove a model for replication across the land, bridging divides, reconnecting people, and reintegrating a long troubled and conflicted island nation.

The partnership between the community and the institutional framework of INURED has already catalyzed promising initiatives for the future. From a "Youth-to-Youth Initiative" facilitated by the Institute and students outside Haiti, particularly students from the University of Miami, a new youth community center network project has emerged. This why the US students were in Haiti with Haitian students meeting with the youth leaders in Cité Soleil to advance in a process started since the birth of the Cité Soleil Community Forum when the earthquake hit…

2. Haiti Laid Bare: Fragility, Sovereignty, and Delusional Recovery

At the time of this writing, more than one year after the cataclysm, not much has substantially changed on the ground. The terrifying sound of the trembling itself – *goudougoudou*, as Haitians have come to describe it – still reverberates on the tongues, in the ears, and indeed deep in the souls of virtually everyone who experienced it firsthand. The white dust that rose over the city like a mushroom cloud has settled, to be sure, but only to reveal a stark landscape that, chillingly, remains almost identical to that which the quake left in its immediate wake, with the exception of the now vast expanses of bright blue tarpaulins, peppered here and there with improvised or distributed tents, that continue to inadequately shelter the homeless. Let's briefly ponder what goudougoudou and its sequelae have already exposed to us concerning Haiti and her endemic fragility:
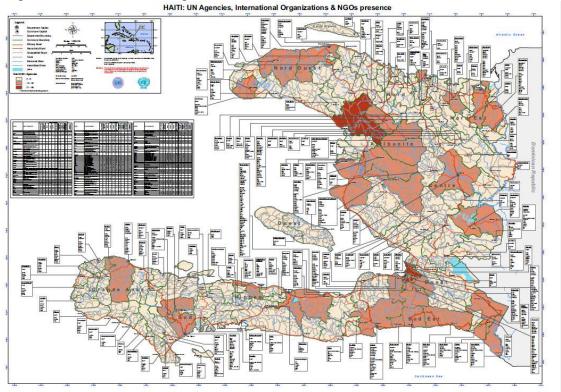
- The sheer scale of the death toll itself representing the tragic culmination of a half-century of unrestrained in-migration to an urban center sorrowfully ill-equipped to absorb the refugees of the precipitous collapse of a rural economy that was systematically neglected for more than a century;
- The compounding dynamics of excessive concentration and fragmentation of power, politics and institutional infrastructures in Port-au-Prince;
- The ubiquitous physical destruction providing irrefutable testimony to a long-standing anarchic pattern of settlement and construction, unplanned land use, with no regard to regulatory codes or sanctions;
- The countless unanesthetized amputations by hacksaw or cruder implements, with little or no post-"operative" care, speaking volumes not only to the enormity of the crisis and of the individual heroism of both its victims and their caregivers, but also highlighting the pusillanimity of Haiti's institutional capacity to respond to even the most basic needs of her population in terms of essential services;
- The unsustainable dependency of local communities on NGO's resulting from the retreat of the state from social service provision.

To this day –with only an estimated 5% of the 3.3 million cubic yards of rubble created by the quake having been cleared (2%:8 months::100%:33.3 years!); and 800,000 people, according to OCHA, still living under infra-human conditions, with inadequate shelter, security and basic services – one can only ask what 24 years of intense and costly international attention to Haiti's so-called democratic transition have wrought? And this question must perforce be posed not only with respect to the presumptive benefits derived by the Haitian people from the largess of international donors, but also in terms of the actual impact of decades of hundreds of presumably well-designed, well-intentioned and well-funded programs explicitly targeting the political stability and economic growth. Finally, one is left with another critical conundrum: Has the international community learned anything about how to engage Haiti effectively… and will it ever?

Almost like an MRI scan, then, *goudougoudou* is in the process of revealing far more about Haiti than the naked eye could ever hope to detect – both to Haitians themselves, from all walks of life, and to those who hail from beyond Haiti's borders and fancy

themselves capable of contributing to its "recovery." Moreover, just as it exposed the woeful inadequacy of the wrought iron re-bar that was putatively deployed to support and to sustain Haiti's now largely crumbled homes and public edifices, the earthquake will ultimately teach the international community much about the weaknesses of its own strategies to reinforce Haiti's strengths and mitigate its frailties.

It may reasonably be argued, in fact, that Haiti's deficit of citizenship, and the frailty of its social contract, have opened the way to a marked diminution in national sovereignty itself over time, given the omnipresence of the international community – in its various manifestations, including international agencies, international financial institutions, bilateral donors and the ubiquitous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – since the early '50s, and the multiple roles it has been called upon to play with respect to both the well-being and security of Haiti's population and the stability of her fragile State. It is common currency among students of Haitian State and civil society to describe the country today as "the NGO Republic," referring to both Haitian and international NGOs and allies. Clearly, as the State became increasingly unable and unwilling to act on behalf of the nation, local, national and international organizations quite understandably, given their missions, moved in to fill the void, albeit chaotically. At the same time, this development has served to enable a more-or-less continuing process of State withdrawal from direct responsibility for service delivery in any sector, and the further withering of its very capacity to do so. Even the coordination function presumably to be fulfilled by the government under existing law has never been exercised.

HAITI: UN Agencies, International Organizations & NGOs presence

For decades, NGOs had the dominant role in Haiti's development. Even now, they play a crucial role in the relief process and provide the only safety net available for millions. For

many Haitians, NGOs provide their principal connection to infrastructure, health services, and economic assistance as well as bridge remote communities to ideas, experts, and resources from all over the world. However, NGOs constitute an uneven patchwork of disparate and often competing interests that fragment society and undermine state development. They do this by outsourcing state functions, opting to hire experts rather than develop indigenous expertise. Further, NGOs pay consultants almost ten times what the government or any local agency can afford. This has drained the state of capable personnel. More fundamentally, NGOs form a shadow state that lacks democratic accountability. The aftermath of the earthquake revealed that NGOs neither have the coordination, authority, nor scale to effectively manage a crisis. These are ultimately the responsibilities of a state.

The international community has been engaged in efforts to "save" Haiti through relief programs, aid, and military interventions - at each intersection of plagues, disasters and violence - for decades before the earthquake. But these efforts have largely failed because of the fundamental lack of incorporate people's voices, resiliency, and solidarity into development plans. If decision-makers do not address this long-standing problem, planners and decision-makers will not be able to build a new, different society. In this way, the problem of Haiti is a common problem of citizenships—recognizing the long-term significance of putting humans at the center of the idea of development.

From the first days after the earthquake, local solidarity formed around food, shelter, water, despite the threat of violence and fragmented nature of security. And if anything has been the source of survival for families living on the streets of post-earthquake Port-au-Prince, it is this very solidarity. It is paramount that international institutions and the Haitian government invest in this solidarity by fostering its formalization into neighborhood committees, block groups, and community forums. Failure to connect with and capitalize on people's solidarity and ability to organize will result in the failure to connect the nation to the larger rebuilding process; a process not simply of rebuilding infrastructure but of rebuilding Haitian society.