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Organización
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联合国教育、
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UNESCO FORUM

« Rebuilding the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of Haiti »

Concept note

UNESCO, 24 March 2010

On 12 January 2010 an already convalescent Haiti was shaken to trauma. The earthquake levelled a country that was still recovering from the devastating 2008 cyclones and its tectonic magnitude and impact is dwarfed by the extent of the physical and emotional damages suffered by the Haitian people.

The numbers are sobering and defy imagination: hundreds of thousands victims - killed, maimed, homeless or distressed; hundreds of thousands of buildings destroyed, including homes, schools, universities museums, government and administrative buildings, archives, libraries and stores. This all spells an unbearable tragedy. In the words of Haiti's President, René Prével, "On January 12, the Haitian State collapsed in a single minute". Indeed, the Port-au-Prince earthquake shook the country to its foundations.

Because the social fabric of Haiti was ripped along the fault line, international assistance cannot be limited only to the physical needs of the population – health, water, food and security. This is one main lesson learned by United Nations agencies in years of international disaster assistance in many countries: to build back better, short term emergency measures must be immediately linked to and integrated with mid- and long-term recovery programmes.

Helping Haitians recover and rebuild calls for sustained efforts on their parts and of the international community and the friends of Haiti. In Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Leogane and Cabaret, the high death toll and the unending rubble did not result only from the natural disaster but also from human shortcomings. The sad fact is that countries are far from equal before disasters. Natural disasters crush developing countries with more impact and destruction than others, given their fragility. Devastating effects are long lasting to the point of jeopardizing any development efforts and gains of preceding years.

Beyond responding to and helping to alleviate the humanitarian emergency, the Haitian rebuilding task will comprise a complex development effort, with being at its heart above all a twofold social development challenge. To be sure, Haitians need safer buildings, bridges, power plants or roads. But the multiple physical infrastructure needs are only one aspect of the picture. Without a workable education system or trained teachers, what would be the point of having school and university buildings, even if built back in a safer manner? Haitians cannot hope to own the renovation and the development of their country if there is no focus on the "soft" infrastructure of the nation, which must include as building blocks governance, education, the sciences, culture, communication and information. Complementing bricks and mortar, the formation of human support and knowledge networks and advice for appropriate policies, capacity-building and social innovation will be indispensable for Haitian society to regain self-confidence and resilience.

What must be kept in mind is that initiatives by UNESCO or other agencies will benefit Haitians only if they contribute to the greater goal of revitalizing the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of the country and only if the Haitians are the key actors in the process. Rebuilding Haiti is about social transformations that must be inspired from its government, its civil society, its experts and its intellectuals. Reconnecting Haitians with

themselves, a new social contract may need to emerge from the rubble. In other words, the energies and the ideas of the Haitian people must be at the root of every initiative, from conception to implementation.

Culture plays a significant role in the provision of psycho-social support and the continuity of Haitian identity and civilization. It will be indispensable to revamp and safeguard the richness of the Haitian heritage in all its forms. Since culture is also a growth engine of Haiti, cultural tourism and creative industries also have an important role to play in the future of the country.

Education is an essential pivot for recovery and eventual rebuilding. With one thousand teachers having disappeared in the earthquake, with thousands of schools destroyed and the three universities of Port-au-Prince down to rubbles, Haiti's education sector needs urgent humanitarian relief to help restart schooling as soon as possible. Building on its expertise in previous disasters, UNESCO included three education projects totaling US\$ 2.9 million in the first United Nations Haiti Flash Appeal: to solicit support for the emergency reactivation of schooling, especially at the secondary and higher levels; emergency support to national education authorities, and psycho-social support through the training of teachers. This is just a kick-start to inject some degree of normalcy into the life of the battered people and especially the youth.

In the next months and years, the Haitian government needs to be assisted in building back a better education system than before, focusing on quality, gender equality, inclusion and access at all levels. All the dimensions of education should be integrated, with particular attention to primary and secondary education, technical and vocational training and higher education, all of which are key factors for the social transmission of knowledge.

As the main institutions for the creation, the preservation and the transmission of knowledge, universities will play a major role in this effort at mobilizing knowledge in all its dimensions, notably the social and the natural sciences. In particular, drawing on its tested expertise - with Tsunami early warning systems and disaster risk reduction efforts - UNESCO will offer support to local institutions so as to help them improve resilience to natural disasters, including earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other natural hazards.

In collaboration with the Haitians, organizations of the UN system and other international organizations, national development agencies, NGOs and the intellectual and artistic communities, UNESCO will seek to mobilize efforts and support to help gradually rebuild a broad range of the social and cultural fabric of Haiti.

Communications and information will also play a significant role to bring the people together, support each other and help establish humanitarian information systems. Assessments will be needed of the capacities of and lacunae in local and community media so that they can contribute to the rebuilding of the social fabric.

In its role as a catalyzing partner for the Haitian people, UNESCO will organize on 24 March 2010 in Paris a meeting with Haitian leaders, intellectuals, artists and social scientists from the wider Haiti community, which includes its strong and vibrant diaspora, and with international experts and friends of Haiti on the theme “Rebuilding the Social, Cultural and Intellectual Fabric of Haiti”. The recommendations from this meeting will be included in UNESCO’s contribution to the International donors’ conference that will be held at the end of March at United Nations Headquarters in New York on the rebuilding of Haiti.