Haiti: Cultural and social aspects of recovery and growth

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Haiti’s deep green hills and low mountains slope directly into the surrounding azure of the Caribbean Sea. From the air on September 19, 2011, it looked perfect for a relaxing vacation in the sun. Nevertheless, a deeply cracked terminal building met me on arrival. Uniformed and armed United Nations troops swarmed Port au Prince, pressing through crowded, uneven streets in black-on-white UN vehicles. Crumpled homes and businesses remained nearly as they fell during the earthquake in January of 2010. Public service billboards shared tips about water safety and sanitation to fight the ongoing cholera epidemic, and vast refugee camps baked on the hills outside the city.

Haiti receives extensive help from the international community, but the results did not look good. Despite well-intentioned gifts and programs, Haiti had made little progress toward recovery from the earthquake or establishment of a functional economy. My goal for the next five days was to learn about Haiti’s culture, its development challenges, and some organizations that are producing long-term solutions. If we can understand how and why their approaches work, we may be able to apply that understanding to future disaster recovery.

I met Deve Jerome, my expert driver, translator, and security escort, at the airport. Deve’s background is in engineering, and he operated a cell phone store until the earthquake destroyed it. We went directly to a car rental business, where I waited in the small lobby while Deve arranged our SUV rental. I didn’t understand the Creole dialogue on the television, but I could piece together the basic premises. In these few minutes, the sequence of short sketches and ads included:

1. A comedic interaction between two people and a voodoo character wearing a shaggy costume
2. An ad showing that one should not hit children with a belt, sponsored by US AID and others
3. A Haitian Direct (product) ad for radio, TV, etc. services
4. An ad about health care – several people in photos, some in health facilities
5. An ad about using Clorox or water purification tablets
and washing vegetables, followed by children chanting what appeared to be a recap of the lesson.

The rental company required cash to cover a $1000 (American) deposit plus $750 for the five-day rental. The company did not offer insurance.

Leaving Port au Prince for Cap Haitien, the SUV dipped and jostled as Deve avoided the larger potholes and bumped through the smaller ones. Our canned drinks sloshed and splashed, and I was glad for Deve’s driving proficiency as he squeezed us between loaded trucks and crowded buses, wandering animals and purposeful street vendors.

Many people rode motorcycles, which can thread between the larger potholes, and motorcycle taxis far outnumbered automobile taxis. For long treks, locals buy a spot on a repurposed school bus or pick-up truck that travels between towns. The brightly painted trucks are outfitted with passenger benches and sometimes with covers. Extra riders stand on the back of the truck or sit on top of the bus. We saw as many as 15 people packed into one uncovered truck bed. Each vehicle usually has a short phrase painted in French or Creole across the top at the front: “Toujours Kris Kapab.” “Tout les Saints.” “Merci Bon Dieu.” “Christ Vivant.” “Grace Infinie.” I also saw a few English vehicle-front messages: “Jesus Loves Us.” “God Give.” The vehicles usually have a second phrase or Bible reference painted along each side. Popular topics included patience, salvation, blessing, praises to God, and the future return of Jesus. Mile after mile, the kaleidoscope continues: vibrant pedestrians, gorgeous tropical fruits, and cheerful messages of faith and hope.

Street-side businesses can be as bright as the buses, selling local agricultural products and imported manufactured goods from barrels, boxes, or colorful umbrella-tables. Businesses that operate from more permanent structures tend to advertise their products.
Multitudes of tents and patched-together dwellings covered the grassy hillsides just outside Port au Prince following the earthquake. According to Deve, they remained in use twenty months later for two reasons: Many people lack the money to rebuild their destroyed homes, and they have nowhere to go, so they now live in tents. Many others have homes in the city but maintain a tent residence “because it serves them to be there when someone comes with free goods.” I asked him if people whose homes were destroyed ever join together to clear the rubble or to rebuild their homes. For the first time since I met him, Deve looked confused, as he shook his head, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question.” So I explained how people in the Midwest have traditionally come together to rebuild a barn that burns down, and I told him that if my house was reduced to rubble, I would look for other families whose homes had been destroyed, and I would propose that we work together to clean up everyone’s property. Deve replied, “We do not have that kind of solidarity in Haiti. Nobody would do that.”

Tuesday, September 20, 2011

Today we drove south from Cap Haitien to Haiti’s most important historical landmark, the Citadel. There we met Patrick Delatour, who chaired Haiti’s Presidential Commission for Reconstruction following the 2010 earthquake. Patrick studied architectural engineering at Harvard and earned his master’s degree at Columbia before returning to Haiti, where he served as the national architect for several years. He lost both of his parents and a house in the earthquake, yet helped develop the Haitian government’s strategy for rebuilding. After exploring the Citadel, we spent the afternoon with Patrick and some of his colleagues, discussing Haiti’s economic situation and the progress of their recovery efforts.

The Citadel is a huge stone fortress that the Haitians built for Henri Christophe after they obtained their freedom from French control more than 200 years ago. The heavy stone structure
remains largely intact, complete with rows of cannons and pyramidal stacks of cannonballs. To get there, we drove along another rutted road to the base of the 3,000-foot Bonnet a L’Eveque mountain, which is crowned by the Citadel. Arriving at a parking lot near the ruins of Sans-Souci Palace, we found a guide (required before proceeding) and several people selling bamboo flutes, hand-sewn dolls, lidded baskets, strung seed necklaces, and wooden souvenirs. With the guide, we drove up a narrow, winding fitted-stone road to another parking area where we left the SUV and continued the journey on horseback. My calm brown horse wore a leather saddle that was tied in place with knotted clothesline. One young man led each horse, another person walked along each horse’s flank with a small whip, and someone else accompanied us on horseback. The original guide remained with us as well. Clearly, many tips would be required.

At the top of the mountain, the horses and our several guides rested while we enjoyed the landscape. I tasted a squishy red coffee berry alongside the path, and one of our guides plucked guavas from a tree near the Citadel as he explained that they are good for curing diarrhea. Although we saw only two small groups of visitors, this seemed like an outstanding tourist attraction. The stone fortress was impressive in size and construction, complete with the tomb of a nobleman’s leg, lost in an explosion long ago (but he survived). A feeling of freedom hit me here – no guard rails, no signs saying “don’t touch,” no rule against picking the wild fruit. I stood atop the high stone walls, walked their distance, looked over the side, then listened to Haitian flutists while Patrick and his entourage finished their tour. He was travelling with his daughter Patsy, her fiancé, a guest from Africa, and security personnel.

Riding in Patrick’s ATV on the way down from the Citadel, I asked him what he likes best about Haiti. He replied, “The people. Haitians are resilient, they adapt, and they can survive anything. I like that Haitians are multi-religious and tolerant, and whatever happens in Haiti, the people know how to survive.” As overseer of the Citadel’s restoration, he had arranged for local workers to build the Citadel road, and he has been involved with this community for a long time. All along the stone road, past small houses and people selling fruit and handmade goods, Patrick would smile, wave, or point at the children, and they all seemed to know him. Several times he stopped to talk briefly, and some of the older women rushed to greet him with kisses or hand-pats. Then we’d dash farther down the road, while Patrick continued his commentary about the economic situation, the restoration of the Citadel, and his dream of attracting more tourists to the area.

We picked up our car at the parking lot, and then followed Patrick down to the town, where we rejoined his group in the ATVs. Now zipping through tropical forest on a narrow dirt path, Patrick continued, “The people here are ruining the environment. They cut trees and pull rocks out of the river to build with.” Asked if they clear the land for farms, he replied, “It doesn’t matter why they do it, the problem is that we are losing our forest... Look at this,” pointing to a cleared area dotted with low plantain trees, “this will take years to regrow.” As we approached a wide place that appeared to be the end of the path, Patrick maneuvered around a barrier to join an even smaller trail, and off we went through the brush. Along the way, Patrick enlarged on his love for this forest and the importance of preserving it. He explained that, “too
many Haitians live from day to day. They don’t think about the future, about what they are leaving for their children.”

When we arrived at Patrick’s open-sided house, we chatted with four other guests while caterers set out lunch in the clearing. Patrick and the owner of our hotel in Cap Haitien enthusiastically discussed their plans to bring boatloads of visitors here for multi-day tours. The native Haitian hotel owner looked more German than Haitian, with light brown hair and blue eyes. As the conversation continued, Patrick referred to “Blancs”… then froze for a moment, turned to me, and explained, “it’s not racist, it’s about being an outsider.” So, he continued, the dark African in our circle is “Blanc because he’s not Haitian,” but the blue-eyed native hotel owner “is a big Black Man.” A crowd of local people gathered to watch us, standing on the steps and porch of Patrick’s house and throughout the clearing.

Over lunch, Patrick shared several stories about Haitian ingenuity and clever approaches to obtaining money, jobs, and power. For example, in trying to get the plans for a building from a government repository, he found that the librarian had stored the plans for each floor of the building in a different place. Nobody else knew where to find them, so the librarian was indispensable. Based on Patrick’s experiences, it seems that many Haitians develop specific knowledge that is not shared with others as a way to build job security. Others rely on social connections with power-holders, as did a craftsman who worked for the president, receiving negligible pay, to gain access to government leaders who could help his sons with their military careers. Patrick generalized this strategic thinking to the culture at large, where economic success often comes through control of shared resources or access to governmental leaders.

Back in the ATV, Patrick repeated his wave-and-smile interactions with several local people alongside the little pathway. Twice, he stopped and waited for women who rushed as best they could to greet him. The first was an old woman who struggled a bit climbing a side-path to reach us. He greeted her warmly and handed her twenty (American) dollars. She smiled, eyes sparkling, gave him a pat with her thanks, and watched as we continued on our way. The second was a young woman, toddler on her hip, whom he likewise greeted by name and presented with a twenty-dollar bill. I asked him how he decides who should get his help, and he replied with a broad arm-sweep, “I know all of the people here, so I know who needs it. The old woman, she is too weak to work, so I help her because I know that she cannot produce. The young woman has children, and she cannot produce enough to take care of them, so I help her. There are others who want me to give them money, but they can produce, and they must understand that I cannot give money to everyone. Sometimes people get jealous, but that is always going to happen. I try to treat everyone fairly, and at the holidays I do for all of the children, so most of the families are included in that.” Patrick went on to restate his hope to revitalize the local economy through increased tourism around the Citadel.

Power through Resource Control

According to Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), control over a scarce resource can produce power if those who need the resource believe that it is critical and without substitutes.
Returning to Cap Haitien, we passed many roadside vendors of native fruit and colorful booths selling lottery tickets. The lottery shops, such as Rapidite Bank (see photo), seemed to be everywhere, in the cities and along country roads, and it was disheartening to see them thriving among homes and businesses that were barely holding together.

In Cap Haitien, the UN presence was noticeable, largely a contingent from Nepal. As elsewhere in Haiti, the people tended to be well-dressed in bright colors and stylish clothing. This contrasted strongly with the open manhole covers and heaps of trash along the sidewalks and on the beaches. US AID has tried to reduce the litter by providing trash cans in at least one park, but I was discouraged to see half-empty cans surrounded by garbage.

We ate dinner with Patrick’s group at the hotel, and he continued to emphasize the importance of sustainable development in Haiti. He also protested the international claim that Haiti is the most corrupt nation, arguing that if this is true, Haitians must be very bad thieves because they remain the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Early in the meal, all of the lights in the vicinity flashed and went dark… then within a minute, the hotel lights flickered on. Patsy, who has been living in the U.S. for several years, drank only bottled water and refused uncooked vegetables. After she instructed the waiter not to give her a salad, her father quietly suggested that she should let him bring it so “it has left the kitchen. Once it has left the kitchen, it cannot be served to another guest. The food will not go to waste if you don’t want it – someone on the staff will eat the salad. If you tell them not to bring it, then you deprive the staff of the food.”

During supper, Patrick talked disapprovingly about the US government’s involvement in the earthquake recovery. He pointed out that the United States government, while claiming that they had invested large amounts of money in Haiti’s recovery from the earthquake, actually “used a lot of that money to support military and communication exercises that did not benefit the people of Haiti at all.” He further protested the inclusion of military salaries, which would be paid anyway, in US estimates of support provided to Haiti. Overall, he seemed to be disappointed because the U.S. government treated the disaster as an opportunity to test equipment and military maneuvers rather than focusing on the needs of the people.
Wednesday, September 21, 2011

In the early morning, we met Bernard, a multilingual economist, who would guide us to one of the 240 Compassion International projects in Haiti. Along the way, we crossed several little creeks and three wide but shallow rivers where women washed their clothing and dried them on the white rocks while their children played in the water. A few people carried bundles, buckets, or baskets across the rivers, and we even saw one man carrying another man on his back. Bernard instructed Deve, moment by moment, through the river crossings, and although we skirted a truck that was stopped in the middle of the widest river, we didn’t get stuck.

At the end of a particularly challenging dirt road, we found the Compassion International project, where they provide health care, education, and spiritual guidance for nearly 200 local
children whose families don’t have the resources to meet these needs. The atmosphere changed instantly, and I felt that we had entered a sheltered space. Concrete-block buildings surrounded a grassy play area, complete with a slide and swing set, and banana trees dotted a gentle slope behind the facility. The buildings were finished, and despite obvious repairs to the walls, they appeared to be weatherproof. A pair of adults, flanked by brightly dressed children, welcomed us. We walked through a day-lit classroom building, decorated inside and out with paintings of local fruit, animals, and people. It was sparsely furnished with hand-made cane and stackable plastic chairs for the preschoolers, long benches for the older children, and painted wooden tables. No luxuries, but clean, orderly, and functional. This is clearly a safe place where children can learn and thrive without worrying about the poverty and health risks that threaten Haiti’s general population.

The congenial project director—educated in teaching and also in counseling—outlined for me the curriculum that she has developed for each age group. The activities seem to be designed to help each child find his or her talents, and to prepare them for success as adults. Detailed plans were charted on large pages in the administrative office, including schedules for music, videography, and other art courses. Compassion provides sewing and cooking lessons, extensive health education, and resources for lifelong well-being. The facility has limited electricity, so they use a gasoline generator as necessary.

The nurse’s office was modestly equipped, including a cupboard of first aid supplies, a desk, several informational posters, and a bed that is used when one of the children gets sick. Despite the remote location, the nurse works fulltime during school months. She monitors every child, sends monthly reports to Compassion headquarters in Port au Prince, and cares for children as necessary. Given the ongoing cholera epidemic—over 470,000 Haitians became ill from cholera and nearly 7,000 died between October 2010 and November 2011 (US Centers for Disease Control statistics)—I asked the project director if they had any outbreaks of the disease. She replied that one of the children had gotten sick with cholera, and that the nurse recognized it quickly enough to save the child and prevent the disease from spreading. The nurse cared for the child while they waited for a motorcycle taxi to transport the child to a health facility. The director explained that motorcycle taxi is the best option for evacuating a sick person quickly because motorcycles can travel faster and more reliably on the difficult road than can trucks or automobiles. The project
has provided families with water filters and purification tablets, and they rigorously train the children in personal hygiene.

The pastor of the nearby Wesleyenne Church helps to oversee the school, and a crowd of at least thirty children followed him through much of our visit. He explained that Compassion works closely with local stakeholders, including a committee that includes representatives of parents, church, and children. Their goal is to help the children become healthy, productive adults who will eventually support and enhance their community. Unlike many disaster-relief programs in Haiti, Compassion takes a long-term approach that gives their kids job skills and life skills. One by one, they are building local, sustainable capabilities to improve Haiti’s future.

Motorcycles Transport People and Things through Haitian Towns

**Thursday, September 22, 2011**

Following a breakfast of omelet and fresh-squeezed lemon juice, we visited some local landmarks, a university, and a hospital. We drove first to a large public square adjoining a beautiful Catholic church. Consistent with what I had seen elsewhere, the church and surrounding area were clean and in good repair. At the nearby university of business and economics, young men and women registered for classes amid the crash and buzz of new construction. One huge tree shaded a courtyard in the middle of the classrooms.

The public hospital, while overcrowded, seemed to be clean and well-run. Many small children occupied each room in the pediatric building. Most had i.v. drip bags with tubes attached to needles in their arm or hand. Haitian nurses in pristine white clothing attended a few small babies, and other women, presumably mothers or female relatives, sat beside individual children. A typical room included rows of beds along opposite walls, and a table or two in the center of the room. Health care staff often sat at the table(s) reviewing papers. The dozen or so beds in each room were far enough apart to allow access from both sides, but even so, the rooms felt packed. It appeared that the cholera epidemic might be stressing the hospital’s capacity, but there were many health care workers, and they seemed to be managing the crowd of sick children calmly and professionally.

After the hospital, we returned to the site of the final battle between the Haitian slaves and the French. Metal memorial statues preside here over an open space, in remembrance of the
revolt that brought independence to Haiti. A boy wandered among us with an icy bin of individual water packets on his head, shouting occasionally to advertise his product. The water is sealed in small square flexible plastic pouches, which litter the ground around the memorial and the hill that slopes upward behind the statues. As elsewhere, well-dressed people in the park seemed oblivious to the garbage. The view of Cap Haitien and low, green mountains was lovely, and two goats grazing behind the statues seemed to be content as they nibbled the groundcover along the hillside.

Back at the hotel, Deve ate roasted goat while I enjoyed roasted pork, both with starchy, savory, fried plantain. I asked Deve if my coloring has an effect on the way we are treated, and he replied that being white makes me look like an outsider, and that generally opens doors in Haiti. “People here like to meet people from America. Some of them hope that you will give them something, and some are interested in why you are here.” Although Deve indicated that many Haitians appreciate the help they get from America, he added that Haiti needs to develop its own resources. He pointed out that Haiti has been an exporter of agricultural goods, but that Haiti now exports almost nothing and survives largely on international donations. Looking out over the shoreline, he waved toward the boats at the port, and he said that these boats are largely used for transport around the island, “but in the past, they would have carried bananas and cloth to outside markets.” The theme again arose that reliance on external donations had replaced the motivation to develop an independent economy.

**Friday, September 23**

We left the hotel before dawn to return to Port au Prince. Cap Haitien’s streets were awake and active at daybreak, as many people unloaded carts of merchandise, carried large bundles of charcoal or baskets of fruit on their heads, set up tables and umbrellas, or boarded brightly colored busses or passenger-trucks. School children in matching uniforms clustered here and there along the sidewalks. Outside the city, people walked along the roadway with buckets, bundles, or baskets balanced on their heads.

Deve wanted to reach Haiti’s capitol city well before sundown because it is dangerous to be on the streets after dark. “Only criminals and ignorant tourists are outside at night in Port au Prince.” I asked if the large number of UN troops was helping with the crime problems, but Deve explained that the UN’s extensive peace-keeping presence strictly protects the government. “UN troops would not intervene if a fight broke out immediately in front of them.”
Beyond the problem of street crime, Deve showed concern about continuing slavery in Haiti. It is a point of pride for Haitians that their nation was built by slaves who overthrew their former masters, but Deve told about a different kind of slavery that still occurs here. “A trusted person sometimes takes a child from the parents on the promise of caring for the child, then treats the child as a slave in his house. Parents who cannot care for their child will hand the child to this person because they know and trust him, and he says that he will send the child to school and care for the child. Then when the child comes to his house, he does not treat the child as he treats his own children. Instead, the child is made to clean the house and work all day, and the child may not get to go to school at all. This is a very big problem in Haiti, and it is just the same as slavery because the child has no choice and no place to go.”

When we arrived in Port au Prince, we took a final look around the city. Much of the earthquake rubble had been cleared from the streets, but even the presidential palace remained badly damaged. From the safety of our high-security lodgings, I thought about the people in the tent cities who are afraid to use the privies at night because of violence in the camp. The need for stronger recovery efforts, both locally and internationally, was obvious, and ongoing support for tent cities didn’t seem like a good strategy for normalizing—and then improving—Haitian life.

Saturday, September 24

Haiti has received aid in the form of money, goods, and voluntary assistance from a variety of large and small organizations. One source of ongoing support has been American church teams that come for several days to tackle specific clean-up or building projects. A team from the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Decatur, Illinois, had just completed a week of construction assistance, so I asked Dr. Wes Feltner, the group leader, to talk about their experiences. He said that they were rebuilding homes with Baptist Global Response, which mobilizes disaster relief teams.

The Illinois team was matched with local people by an American missionary who “has been working with the Haitian people for almost 13 years. So he already had the infrastructure established here.” The American coordinator speaks the local language and knows the people, so he was able to build a Haitian workforce to oversee teams that volunteer as construction workers for a week or two. “It also helps the economy here, because you get people working, where Haitians are making money and earning an income... He has what’s called Haitian “Bosses.” They’re kind of like project managers. So for instance, the Haitian Boss that I worked with, his specialty, so to speak, was building doors, hanging doors, those kinds of things, so I was partnered with him to do that kind of work all week. So you’ve got the Haitian task force, and
then you’ve got the American groups… or from other places that will come in, they partner together to do the projects of the rebuilding of these homes.

“The reason for that, to the best of my knowledge – ‘cause I only have one week experience here – but just from talking with the local missionary, it was really more of helping the Haitians learn a trade, make money, really almost building a small economy – that it’s more than just the x’s and o’s of building a house, though that’s very important, but training people along the way to be able to do things themselves. So that was a part of the vision here.

“If we come in and we’re doing all the work, and then we leave, we haven’t really equipped them to do anything. It works better if you’re equipping them, training them, and then just partnering Americans or others who simply want to come help… Our desire, our heart is, and we won’t be apologetic about the fact that we believe because of God’s love and God’s grace in our lives, how can we not be loving of all peoples who are in need? And so that’s our driving motivation. So you bring those who want to come and help, but you have a bigger vision of ‘how do we leave Haiti, whenever our time is done, with the proper tools and training to carry on the work when we’re gone?’ So that would be, I think, why they’re doing it that way… there’s always going to be work to be done. Wherever you go, there’s always more you can do. But it’s making the impact in the person, more than just accomplishing the task. And it leaves you with that feeling of, as I shared with our group, you always feel like you received more than you gave, when it’s about relationship rather than work goals that have to be accomplished. The people are the goal, in terms of loving them and embracing them, more than the job itself.

“In fact, in many ways, I was shocked at the skills that they’d developed. The guy that I worked with, there were multiple times when we’d hit a snag and think, ‘okay, what are we gonna do here,’ and he would creatively think of a way to put it together. And so—and they’re doing this every single week, and they’ve been doing it every week now for months—and so now you’ve got Haitian bosses that have really learned the skills of carpentry, of construction, all those kinds of things, and so I was really blown away at the knowledge that they’ve gained… but early on, a lot of that training would have been done. We’ve kind of seen the after effects of ‘wow! These people really know what they’re doing!’

“I know that the local missionary here had a few trusted Haitian men that he was able to build from. And then they would go out and find other well-abled individuals, and just keep building – and a lot of it has to do with honesty. You have to be working with people that you know and you trust, people that aren’t going to steal your tools and all those kinds of things. So, it started small and then built to a larger force of people who are trained now, but also see the value of what’s being done.” Wes concluded his story with examples of paid Haitian workers who were temporarily laid off when donations ran short, but they continued to work as volunteers because they had caught the vision of helping their community rebuild. Because the people from Baptist Global Response know that they cannot stay forever, their aid process is designed to increase local motivation and ability to continue the recovery efforts.

Brian Steckler similarly emphasized the importance of working closely with local and international partners: “You need someone with you, whom you can trust, who is local. As hard as that is to find, if you can do it, you will be in much better shape. It’s going to take some time to develop that kind of relationship unless somebody hands this person to you… You need to understand the culture and to be able to move between the international, UN and NGO communities, and the local NGOs, because they are a lot different.” Although these groups are very different, partnerships appeared to be crucial for success in all stages of the disaster response and long-term recovery.
**Thoughts to Consider**

People who control information or skill sets that are scarce but necessary build their own power, but this can cause problems for people around them. How might this practice affect development of Haiti’s infrastructure and economy? How might similar practices affect delivery of humanitarian aid in other countries?

When foreign governments send assistance following a disaster, what is their responsibility toward the local people? How can we reconcile the US government’s desire to develop its disaster response capability in the field with the local desire for maximal assistance?

What kinds of culture change are needed to help local people increase their individual contributions to developing Haiti’s future?

How is the Compassion Project different from programs that distribute food or funds to people living in refugee camps? What long-term implications do you see?

What principles might we draw from the Baptist approach to rebuilding? Could we apply these principles to other aspects of reconstruction in Haiti? Under what circumstances could we generalize these principles to different locations and situations?

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**References**
