

Britt Jacovich

Professor Glover

Comparative Politics

1 May 2017

An Unanticipated Conflict in Haiti: NGOs

At its core, non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) main purpose is to help the individuals who need it most. They locate areas struggling with natural disasters, high levels of poverty, human rights' violations and more, and pour resources and people there to assist them. Their objective is help these communities and bring them out of their conflicts. However, NGOs' expectations are not necessarily meeting reality. Specifically in Haiti, a country that has had hundreds of NGOs present over time, have debatably done more bad than good. In this essay, I will explore the presence of NGOs in Haiti before and after the 2010 earthquake, their impact, and areas for improvement, using examples of current NGOs who have improved the community. Furthermore, I will argue that in Haiti, NGOs need to lower their presence in order for the country to become stronger.

To begin, non-governmental organizations have been in Haiti for years. Since their revolution and subsequent independence from France, they have struggled financially. As Edmonds states, "Haiti became the first 'third world' nation in the traditional sense, as it was poor and overburdened with debt. The Haitian Government could not build schools, hospitals or roads because nearly all of the available money went to pay France" (441). Through the act of paying France for their independence, they were leftover with few resources and were financially unstable. According to Pierre-Louis, they have been unable to recover from this, he affirms, "Haiti had to use all its tax levies to buy its independence from France. Haitian historians and

economics as well as foreign scholars have often traced the roots of Haiti's current poverty to the dreadful decision to pay that debt" (189). Their tax dollars went directly to the debt, and as a result, the Haitian government could not afford social services or fundamental infrastructure needs. They have still been unable to fully recover.

Prior to the devastating 2010 earthquake, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, NGOs started to play a major role in how Haiti developed and how their government was running. Specifically with the World Bank, they "increased NGO participation in its projects from 6% in 1988 to 50% in the late 1990s" (Reimann qtd. in Pierre-Louis 191). While previously, NGOs focused specifically on humanitarian needs, they quickly transitioned into having a more influential role in the government and society themselves. Pierre-Louis states that in the late 1980s and early 1990s "NGOs that were strictly limited to providing humanitarian assistance were now being engaged by donor countries in programs dealing with civil society issues such as democracy enhancement, conflict resolution, and economic projects" (190). Therefore, NGOs and the international organizations that run them, began to have a huge influence on Haiti. Zanotti asserts, "Since NGOs are basically accountable to the constituencies that sponsor them, and Haitian government officials and politicians rely heavily upon them to access the resources (financial or otherwise) necessary to gain internal political consensus, the power of NGOs to steer and influence local politics is likely to be much stronger than the local electorate's" (759). As Zanotti explained, NGOs are only accountable to the individuals or organizations that sponsor them, making the Haitian government and people unable to impact how they are ran. While they do have the option to follow state policies, they are not required to do so. Haitians can protest or advocate for their issues as frequently as they wish, but if their government does not have the supplies or finances to pay for the changes, they have no other choice but to comply with the

NGOs. Therefore, the citizens, or the people who are the most capable of understanding the challenges and improvements they need as a country, are incapable of having their voices heard. They, better than any international organization, should know what they need the most in order to improve. As NGOs became more powerful in Haiti, the 2010 earthquake only made them stronger and Haiti more vulnerable.

As previously stated, NGOs were influential in Haiti before the 2010 earthquake in which “more than 222,570 citizens perished” (Pierre-Louis 187). Haiti struggled before all of these heartbreaking deaths and injuries to provide for its people. In Edmonds’ article, he references Dupuy, affirming that “Before the 12 January 2010 earthquake, Haiti had the most privatized social-service sector in the Americas, with over 80 percent of the country’s basic services provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)” (Dupuy qtd. in Edmonds 440). The Haitian government were barely supporting their people to begin with, making devastation from the earthquake even more difficult to recover from. While following the earthquake, it was necessary and crucial for Haiti to receive emergency supplies and resources, overtime it became more difficult for Haiti to move on and care for themselves. Edmonds asserts, “While many of the NGOs are providing essential albeit temporary services to the people of Haiti – specifically in Port au Prince – they are simply a band aid solution, because when these organizations leave, the Haitian people will be more dependent than before” (446). Some NGOs simply arrive in Haiti, provide them with the resources they need to survive in the moment, and then leave without teaching or providing them with the necessary skills they need to continue living. If NGOs did train residents in the areas they traveled to, it could be “seen as a competition to their continued existence” as NGOs would not be as needed if citizens could care for themselves

(Edmonds 445). While they are crucial to helping in the short-term, NGOs would make a larger impact if they had more long-term training programs or solutions for citizens.

Additionally, NGOs can make a negative impact by sending over international jobs to areas where trained and employed Haitians already exist. Edmond explains, “With the emergency phase of relief over, this means that they should not simply import foreign professionals to do the jobs that locals are capable of, or could be trained to do” (445). There are hundreds of unemployed Haitians looking for work, and rather than train or hire them, NGOs come in and replace their jobs. Not only does this damage the local economy, but it prevents citizens themselves from employment and money that can be put right back into the state through the purchasing of goods. Furthermore, as Zanotti affirms, local produce is also affected by NGOs, he states “Flooding fertile areas with internationally donated food during the harvest season draws the prices of local crops down and ultimately destroys the possibility for local growers to make a living out of their produce” (761). NGOs can provide cheaper alternatives for citizens other than local goods, making their industries and even more jobs fall apart. As mentioned previously, NGOs are important in the short-term and save thousands of lives, but they often fall into the danger of overstaying their welcome. Pierre-Louis emphasizes this, citing “A recent USAID report to the Haitian earthquake showed that most of the aid from the international community went to the same organizations that have been in the country for years” (199). These organizations are preventing Haitians from improving their own economy through their lack of training and from taking the jobs of experienced Haitians, thus making it difficult for them to move on from the devastation.

Not all NGOs in Haiti are further ruining the country and they showcase how international organizations can and should positively impact Haiti. In her article, Zanotti

highlights two NGOs, Partners in Health and Fonkoze, that have successfully helped the Haitian communities through their efforts and services (755). They have established programs that train the local citizens in necessary skills that not only help them survive, but also retrieve them jobs. More importantly, they focus on the people themselves and what they need. In his article, Edmonds affirms that “The first step should be to work with the Haitian people, listen to their demands and give them control over the reconstruction of their own country” (450). NGOs should take a step back, discover what issues are hurting Haitians the most, and cater their services to these problems. It is crucial that NGOs do not put their own desires at a higher scale than Haiti or other countries they are assisting. It is not their country, they are simply there to help, rather than control with their own benefits in mind. As Zanotti asserts, “Care must be rooted in the specific understanding of the particularity of the places within which it is delivered, and provided in such a way that it addresses the needs of the people it is meant to benefit rather than the demands of international governmental or non-governmental structures” (765). The citizens should first and foremost, always be the highest priority.

There is no question that non-governmental organizations are essential to this world. They save thousands of lives every year and are responsible for assisting countries in coming out of their deepest holes. However, specifically in Haiti where NGOs have been in control of the majority of their government and society, it is time for NGOs to ease back or change their structure. Rather than pour resources into areas where these supplies already exist, they can begin training Haitians or hiring citizens to perform the jobs they are fully capable of doing on their own. With the assistance of NGOs, Haitians need to have their voices back and make positive impacts on their own country.

Works Cited

- Edmonds, Kevin. "Beyond Good Intentions: The Structural Limitations of NGOs in Haiti." *Critical Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2012, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0896920512437053>.
- Pierre-Louis, Francois. "Earthquakes, Nongovernmental Organizations, and Governance in Haiti." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41151335>.
- Zanotti, Laura. "Cacophonies of Aid, Failed State Building and NGOs in Haiti: setting the state for disaster, envisioning the future." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2010, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2010.503567>.