

EMBASSY

Embassy - Canada's Foreign Policy Newspaper

Behind the fig leaves and photo-ops

The news from last week's international donors' conference on Haiti in New York is promising as donors and the Haitian government seem to have not only learned from the past, but, more importantly, applied those lessons.

However, the scope of the challenge, both for Haiti and the international community, is immense and there are a few glaring rocks that must be avoided. Post-conference, success for Haiti seems more feasible and failure more distant. Yet given past history—on both the Haitian and donor sides—there is a real chance that the country could fall back to "muddling through."

First, we need to step back and review the situation—something not done much in recent reporting or analysis.

Haiti faces what has been described as the worst natural disaster in modern history. More than 200,000 were killed in the earthquake in Haiti, which is more than from the Asian tsunami that hit more than 11 countries. Close to a million Haitians are homeless and living in precarious situations with the rainy season around the corner and hurricane season not far behind. All this in a country with the weakest government and institutions in the Western hemisphere.

The Haitian government report for the donors' meeting described the situation as "difficult but not desperate." Most observers would beg to differ.

However, on the side of optimism, pledges from donors in New York quickly exceeded the initial short-term target of \$4 billion (US) requested by the United Nations and Haiti.

Donors agreed to leave ministerial egos and photo-ops behind and establish a multi-donor trust fund, managed jointly by the World and Inter-American Development Banks and the United Nations, through which funds will flow to the Haitian government.

A new institution, the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC), was created to manage reconstruction over the next 18 months, with former US president Bill Clinton and Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive to co-chair.

These are significant achievements. Given the almost inevitable tendency of a shortfall between donor pledges and actual disbursements, exceeding the target means that it may actually be met for a change.

The multi-donor trust fund will significantly ease the burden on an already understaffed, under-resourced and crippled government. More than 40 countries and multilateral agencies have made major pledges to Haiti, with many others, such as Serbia and Montenegro, pledging smaller amounts.

Even countries with strong, well-staffed ministries have found the burden of dealing with multiple donors crippling. Tanzania once declared a four-month "mission holiday" to give bureaucrats a rest from dealing with demands from only about 18 donors. In addition to progress in cutting Haiti's foreign debt, cutting the burden of dealing with donors is a major achievement.

The decision to work with the government of Haiti is equally important. After years of working around, and thereby weakening the government, donors have come to realize that a "Republic of NGOs" does not work and have moved to redress the impact of past policy by now focusing on working with the government of Haiti. This is, and has been, obviously needed.

Yet, on the worrying side, this may be a case of a radical pendulum swing from one extreme to the next. It does not

appear that anyone has really thought through what it means to rebuild the Haitian government.

Even before the earthquake, massive resources—human as much if not more than financial—were needed to change a dysfunctional culture and grow competence. So far we have only seen promises of increased funding for the government, a set percentage of which will be spent on each development activity. This is putting the cart before the horse in the worst possible way.

Simply pouring money into the government, even with tight controls and accountability, is not the answer. The government has to be resourced to become an effective aid to development, to provide the counterpart needed by the international community and to provide the type of effective government that Haitians long for but have not seen.

All of this will require changing the culture of the government and that in turn will require massive infusions of new talent and technocrats. A massive inflow of outside technocrats will require thought and attention and it may not work, but at least it has a chance at success. A few advisers here and there will not suffice and will lead to failure.

Donors and multilateral officials have gone to great lengths to stress that work in Haiti will be a "Haitian-led" undertaking. This is a fig leaf. Given the amount of money—and hopefully human resources—being invested, donors will have a dominant voice. This situation wounds Haitian national pride as it should. But it is reality. Hopefully, it will also finally be enough of an inducement for Haitians to put petty politics and infighting aside to rigorously and ruthlessly focus upon doing what is necessary to leave the situation—primarily growing the economy and generating revenue to fund its own government and own its decisions.

But while the foreign donors and multilateral agencies seem to have gotten it right with co-ordination and other changes, the

same cannot be said for the NGO community. The country has thousands of NGOs, each with its own agenda and fundraising imperatives.

If photo-ops are important for politicians, they are infinitely more so for NGOs. This issue will have to be addressed by either donors, or more advantageously, through a few larger NGOs exercising leadership. Co-ordination would also best be served by NGOs that received an overflow of donations finding a means to share resources with the smaller, extremely effective and respected groups that are not known by the general public and hence did not do as well in the fundraising sweepstakes.

We have seen much in recent weeks to inspire hope about Haiti's future, but the challenges are immense and we will need to see much more. Haiti will not fail; a humanitarian disaster so close to the United States and Canada is hard to imagine. But weariness, donor fatigue and an inability of the government and NGOs to focus on the big picture could easily derail progress and leave the country once again muddling along until the next crisis.

Carlo Dade is executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL).

editor@embassymag.ca

©Copyright 2010 Embassy a division of Hill Times Publishing Inc. All rights reserved.