

At a crossroads

Development organisations are calling on the EU to help Haiti's new government on the road to recovery

Large scale humanitarian disasters are, unfortunately, never far from the headlines. Nobody knows that more forcefully than the people of Haiti. In the last 18 months, they have had to deal with the devastating earthquake in January 2010, hurricane Tomas and, more recently, an outbreak of cholera.

In 2009, Haiti had a population of around 10 million people. The earthquake alone killed more than 200,000 and affected more than three million people, half of them children. Some 1.7 million were left homeless and as many as 380,000 children were left without at least one parent. That's a lot for any nation to come to terms with, let alone the poorest economy in the western hemisphere. Today, the country faces a very long and difficult road to recovery.

Recovering from any major disaster is complex and requires time, significant resources and coordination between all actors involved. Equally important is the need for strong leadership.

This month, Haiti enters a new phase in its development, with the newly elected government taking over the country's reins. It will have to get to grips with the multiple challenges the country is facing, but the transition should be seen as an opportunity for lasting change. Instability and lack of transparency have hampered Haiti's development in the past. The new leader is responsible for guiding Haiti towards consolidated democracy and political stability. Only once these foundations are in place can the process of sustainable recovery truly begin.

The new government, with support from the EU and international community as a whole, must make the protection of its people, particularly children, its top priority. More than half a million people remain displaced and in temporary accommodation following the crippling earthquake, and access to water, health and other basic services is a daily concern. Reports of sexual abuse and exploitation are shockingly high. Camps are used as bases for escaped prisoners and gangs, placing children



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Cases of cholera are expected to rise during the upcoming cyclone Season

(credit: Plan)

in a critical position, while incidents of rapes, child trafficking, theft and armed robbery continue. In March 2011, more than 11,000 children were screened at the Haiti-Dominican border and airport of Port-au-Prince – some 21 per cent of them were travelling without legal documents.

The international community demonstrated huge solidarity with Haiti in response to the earthquake, and the EU played a big part, committing €1.2bn to the country's reconstruction and development efforts. But the earthquake tore away the very fabric of Haitian society and institutions. If the EU wants to ensure the efficiency of its aid and of the reconstruction and development process in Haiti, it must invest in the capacity of the country to effectively manage programmes and funding, →

A football pitch in Jacmel is transformed into a tent city following the devastating Haiti earthquake in January 2010

(credit: Plan/Pierre Dominique Refuse)



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which starts with investing in the Haitian people.

Given the EU’s commitment to “democratic governance”, it must support efforts to include civil society, particularly those representing the most vulnerable and marginalised, in the development, monitoring and evaluation of action plans, programmes and legislation.

The EU upholds the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and is committed to mainstreaming these in its external policy. To ensure all its policies in Haiti are coherent and consistent with these principles, the EU must do all it can to support the new Haitian government to protect the most vulnerable in society, particularly women and children. In particular, it must address the issues of protection and psycho-social support in a more systemic way.

It is now critical that the new government and the EU work together with community groups and civil society to support the implementation of a comprehensive social system. This system must include universal quality health and education coverage, access to decentralised services, specific child protection measures, and must build on the respect of the rule of law by supporting justice and police reforms.

Haiti is at a crossroads. But with appropriate support from the EU – institutions and member states alike – and the international community at large, and with the will of its people, particularly its youth, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t have a bright future. The absolute aim, for both the government of Haiti and the EU, must be to enable the people of Haiti to take control of their own lives.

The EU’s high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Catherine Ashton, has called for the bloc to “continue to support Haiti in its endeavours to promote democracy and the rule of law and further the process of reconstruction”. The people of Haiti, and our partners on the ground, are relying on the EU keeping its word and taking a pro-active role in the recovery process. When the hype dies down, we must not forget about them. As Haitian’s themselves might say, “promès se dèt” (a promise is a debt). ★

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