Haiti: So Near, And Yet So Far Away

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Nothing surprises you anymore, not even when the skies tremble...

The swell in natural disasters and social conflicts on the world stage in the past decades, in stark contrast to the reduced spending of developed countries toward relief and recovery efforts during the same period, imparts a sense of urgency to develop creative, diligent, and transparent procedures for carrying out such endeavors. The creation of a Human Security Council as a subsidiary body of the United Nations—but with sufficient autonomy to avoid being shackled by bureaucracy, corruption, and power-struggles and feuding among donor nations—cannot be put off any longer. The broad spectrum of risks to the lives and property of the global population posed by natural disasters, social conflicts, wars, and terrorism are changing the face of the earth by spawning further injustice and poverty, as well as an ever-growing hunger for both food and human rights. The present lack of auditing and oversight mechanisms regulating nations’ aid commitments render many reconstruction projects inoperable: not only are they left without basic resources, but they further face running cost increases due to unreasonable delays in the releasing of funds and technical assistance.

Developmentalism’s contaminating devastation of nature contributes to a human and environmental ecological imbalance that triggers not only a rise in global warming and its inherent consequences, but also losses in air quality and decimated drinking water reserves. The shrinkage and desertization of lands once apt for agriculture, as well as genetic manipulation to control harvests, intensify the dimensions and implications of worldwide food shortages. Added to this are the effects of military tests to measure the destructive potential of the latest generation of biological and nuclear weapons.

In choosing between commitment to the common good and ravenous speculation, or between true solidarity and momentary compassion, the agendas and agreements formed at donor-nation conferences must be preemptively committed to designing and implementing intervention models for the relief, evaluation, and reconstruction stages of aid missions, based on human factors (integrated mental health services) and socioeconomic revitalization from an eco-bioethical viewpoint. The symbiosis between human rights and planetary rights must be valued and preserved.

As soon as we learned of the magnitude of the earthquake in Haiti, the members of the Section of Disasters Intervention of the World Psychiatric Association and the representatives of the UNESCO Iberoamerican Eco-Bioethics Network initiated a dialogue of reflection and proposals under the expert and sensible leadership of Dr. Moty Benyakar. As for me, in responding to the assigned tasks, I took to consulting leaders of the Haitian community in Puerto Rico. Their reactions, complemented by proposals from their country’s diaspora, along with data and images in the media, led me to recapitulate the anguished experiences lived by that nation’s people throughout the course of their historical development. The film God Grew Tired of Us came to mind: a documentary depicting the dehumanizing misery of African boys on their tortuous journey to flee war and exploitation. Haiti’s past and present have been shaken repeatedly by the tremors of poverty, injustice, violence, local corruption, and foreign interventionism. As asserted by the famed Dominican
intellectual, Juan Bosch, whose government was toppled with U.S. military support: The Caribbean is the frontier of empires.

Even though the presence of the United Nations Special Mission in Port-au-Prince has born some fruit in providing minimum levels of short-term social stability, in the medium and long terms, harsh reality points in another direction. The chain of crises—street violence, hunger, illiteracy, hurricanes, and despotic and crooked political practices—further weakens Haiti’s already fragile economic and social infrastructure. Alternatively, local corruption greedily feeds upon a significant percentage of the aid, thereby intensifying the victimization, isolation, and helplessness of the those affected. It has been the cooperative interventions of non-governmental organizations and religious missions from abroad that have accompanied Haitian society in the most direct and continuous way in its perilous struggle to survive. The reckoning of the contributing factors of Haitian society’s dilemmas both before and after the earthquake offers us the opportunity to develop a laboratory of learning in human solidarity with the participation of the country’s inhabitants, its diaspora, and the international community.

The humanitarian aid of United States society strongly contrasts to the type of occupation being carried out by that country’s military. At the historical border of conflict between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the racist remnants of the Trujillo regime meet with the mandates of former president Joaquín Balaguer. The latter, in his book *La isla al revés* [The Island Inside Out], he reiterates his position of Dominican supremacy in relation to Haitian inferiority. Haitians have had to face being treated as third-class refugees when they arrive on the shores of the United States or to the border they share with the Dominican Republic. Their country is part of the Caribbean: so near to, and yet so far away from Puerto Rico. It could hardly be much closer geographically, but it is very far from being able to identify with its hardships and dreams. We are overflowing with aid through civic, professional, religious, and government organizations, despite having a government incapable of coordinating and executing such efforts. I am sorry to see that our show of mourning and Caribbean solidarity did not include postponing the San Sebastián Street Festival. Cuba, on the other hand, once again has openhandedly given from its pot of poverty and professional wealth. The earthquake put Haiti on the map of our consciences. Accompanying and aiding the country’s people in the immediacy of their fragility, and unselfishly depositing into their deficit-ridden bank of hope today and in future misfortunes, grants us the opportunity to become true brothers and sisters.

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