

IS Academy

Human Security in Fragile States



Local-level human security in Haiti

community arrangements, local government
and NGOs after the earthquake

Talitha Stam, Bart Weijs, Gemma van der Haar

RESEARCH BRIEF #9 (MARCH 2014)

Wageningen University | Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs | International
Institute of Social Studies | Cordaid | ICCO | Oxfam Novib | The Netherlands Red
Cross | ZOA | Maastricht School of Management | Utrecht University | IOB Institute
of Development Policy and Management



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March 2013

'Together we form our own government!'

A resident of Petit Boucan, Gressier

How do people cope in the absence of a functioning state? This question is highly relevant to the case of Haiti, where the 2010 earthquake had a severe impact on an already much-questioned government.

Catastrophes put governments to the test. In some cases, where the state is already fragile, the social contract between the state and its citizens unravels even further.¹ In other cases, disaster response and reconstruction offer opportunities for the state to re-assert itself. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti was not such a beneficial turning point for the Haitian government, we found. In the absence of a working state, people in Haiti coped with disaster and sought to fulfill their needs through a variety of local arrangements, including traditional forms of social organization based on kinship and community, as well as through NGOs. The earthquake did not fundamentally change this, though it did in some cases change a balance between the different actors, bringing local arrangements to the forefront.

In this research brief, we synthesise the main findings from several studies around the question: How do people interact with each other and local governance institutions (state/non-state, formal/informal) to shape their own human security? This research project aims to add to the emerging literature on local arrangements and governance in so-called fragile states², since the notion of 'fragile states' has obscured the ways in which societies work under these conditions and how people manage their lives.³

Cordaid and the IS Academy

Within the IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States, the NGO partners develop their own research projects, in collaboration with Wageningen University. This research was commissioned by Dutch NGO Cordaid, which has worked in Haiti for over 30 years. Cordaid chose to approach the research with local and international students, in collaboration with the Haitian research institute Observatoire National de la Violence et de la Criminalité (ONAVC). In doing so, it aimed to contribute to its fundamental goal in Haiti: strengthening local institutional capacities in order to arrive at constructive social change.

1 Pelling, M. & K. Dill (2010). 'Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of socio-political regimes', *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (1): 21-37

2 See also the related study by Oxfam Novib within the IS Academy on local governance in Afghanistan and Somaliland: Van der Haar, G. (2013). 'State and non-state institutions in conflict-affected societies: Who do people turn to for human security?' IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States Occasional Paper 06.

3 Christoplos, I. and D. Hilhorst (2009). 'Human security and capacity in fragile states; a scoping paper', *Disaster Studies Occasional Paper* 01.



Context

The 2010 earthquake drew the world's attention to Haiti, not only because of the impact of the catastrophe, but also because it worsened a situation which was already serious in many respects. Haiti was and still is one of the world's poorest countries, with around eighty percent of the ten million Haitians living in extreme poverty, and one third of the population food insecure.⁴ The country is ranked 161st on the 2013 Human Development Index, and 8th on the Failed States Index. The central government historically focuses on urban areas, notably the capital Port-au-Prince: it lacks capacity and/or willingness to deliver on its core functions, even more so in rural areas. Already prior to the earthquake, international organisations were heavily involved in delivering basic services, which earned Haiti the nickname 'Republic of NGOs'.⁵ This was the context in which one of the most generous outpourings of aid in recent history took place. There was also a massive response in terms of humanitarian interventions.

2010 Haiti earthquake

Date: January 12, 2010. **Magnitude:** 7.3. **Epicentre and impact area:** Léogâne, near the capital Port-au-Prince. **Death toll:** 316,000. **Injured:** 300,000. **Damage:** 1.5 million people (one of every six people in Haiti) lost their homes, and spent over a year in temporary camps; many government buildings collapsed. (Haitian Government estimates). *Though the accuracy of these numbers has been questioned, it is clear that the impact of the disaster was catastrophic.*

⁴ According to the World Bank (latest data available from 2001) and the World Food Programme (2012 data)

⁵ United States Institute of Peace (2010). Peace Brief 23

Approach

In many disaster or conflict-affected regions, the state does not have a strong presence and does not have the ability to provide security and services. To understand how, in these conditions, human security is produced, it is important to study other institutions that fulfil governing functions and the interactions between them. In this research, we focus on governance at the local level: local processes through which people and groups articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences and exercise their rights and obligations.⁶

The concept of human security emphasizes the rights and needs of vulnerable people, and refers not only to their physical security, but also to their social, economic and political security.⁷ It concerns the way assets (financial, social, natural, physical and human) are distributed, the entitlements that households can draw upon in pursuing livelihoods, and also the policies, formal and informal institutions, infrastructure, services and markets that have an impact on security issues.

Our research comprises five studies (see the overview at the end of this Brief), of which four are synthesised here. The research started with a pilot study into rural livelihood strategies in Mombin Crochu. This rural area, less affected by the earthquake, allowed for a basic insight into the role of non-state arrangements. Three follow-up studies were conducted by student researchers focussing on more and less disaster-affected areas and taking different governance issues as starting points: fulfilling basic needs in Petit Boucan, Gressier, the organisation of access to drinking water in Tisous, and land tenure and related conflicts in Mombin Crochu.⁸

Earthquake impact in study areas

Petit Boucan is a rural neighbourhood of Gressier, a city just outside Port-au-Prince, and was destroyed for 75% during the earthquake.
Population (est. 2008): 13,182.

Tisous is located in the Carrefour commune in the capital of Port-au-Prince and was one of the urban regions most affected by the earthquake. 40-50% of the residential buildings were destroyed, and the area received a great deal of international aid.
Population (est.): 15,000.

Mombin Crochu is an isolated rural community in the North-East department of Haiti. The earthquake indirectly affected the area, as the area experienced temporary counter-migration of urban Haitians (lasting up to several months), as well as loss of income, because the earthquake and aid response disturbed markets for produce.
Population: 25,113.

6 De Regt, W., F. van Overbeek, S. Koulen, and G. Andriessen (2010) 'Non-state governance structures providing human security in fragile states: review of current knowledge and research gaps'. Internal report Oxfam Novib/Wageningen University

7 Christoplos, I. and D. Hilhorst (2009). 'Human security and capacity in fragile states; a scoping paper', Disaster Studies Occasional Paper 01.

8 The fifth study, discussed elsewhere, gives an account of the entrepreneurial strategies of female Haitian entrepreneurs, Madam Saras

Findings

The spectrum of governance institutions found in our research ranges from kinship- and community-based arrangements, to traditional leaders, churches, NGOs, and local state institutions.

Yonn ede lòt: rural forms of social organisation

Our pilot study found strong arrangements of mutual help at the community level, the family, and the *konbit*. Haitians seldom work their fields alone.⁹ As described in early anthropological studies of Haiti, the *family* remains the focal point of Haitian rural social organization, with mutual aid and support including participation in agricultural activities, house-building, the lending of tools and domesticated animals, and looking after each other's children.¹⁰ A *konbit* is a communal labour arrangement of three up to twenty peasants that agree to work for free in each other's fields¹¹, usually during the planting season (April to August).

Though rooted in tradition, social organisation is also innovating: a new form is the *gwoupman*, community groups of around five to twenty members, often overlapping with extended family. *Gwoupmans* work on a common problem, on the basis of trust. Collaboration extends beyond the fields or labour, to include e.g. money lending (see the women's *gwoupmans* in the box). Their emergence is associated with the formation of beneficiary groups for the purpose of development projects by NGOs. The form has since assumed a life of its own: even though this form of organisation was initiated externally, our pilot study in Mombin Crochu finds that Haitians continue to work in *gwoupmans* after the relation with the aid organisation has ended. Other people also copied this form of cooperation, incorporating it into their way of working, without the involvement of NGOs.

Women's groups are a specific form of *gwoupman*. There are currently nine female *gwoupman* in Mombin Crochu, in which mutual aid extends beyond agricultural activities. Their main goal is to share ideas on taking care of their homes, husbands and children. Their practices include mutual money lending to pay for school fees; helping each other prepare food to sell at the market; and sharing advice on health and protection against violence by their husbands or other men.

Local governance in the three localities

In terms of key actors and how local inhabitants interact with local governance institutions, there are various parallels between the three localities. Also in the more urban contexts, local grassroots organisations and informal institutions were found to play an important role, before as well as after the earthquake. Local state authorities are present in all the studied areas. Nevertheless, and despite the decentralisation policies, local authorities lack visibility and have insufficient resources to provide basic services. The earthquake has not changed this. Conversely, international NGOs have long had a strong presence in Haiti, and the earthquake has reinforced this. The way interventions are set up is not the same in each community.

9 Smith, J. (2001). 'When the Hands are Many: Community Organisation and Social Change in Rural Haiti'. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

10 Simpson (1941). 'Haiti's Social Structure' *American Sociological Review*, 6 (5): 640-649.

11 Vannier, C. (2010). 'Audit Culture and Grassroots Participation in Rural Haitian Development'. *Polar*, 33 (2): 282-305



*Small house in Petit Boucan
photo: Talitha Stam*

Basic services in Petit Boucan, Tisous and Mombin Crochu

Access to basic services in the study areas is extremely limited. Generally, there are no public schools, health centres or police posts – though Mombin Crochu does have a hospital. There is no electricity, roads are in a deplorable condition, and most people have no direct access to drinking water.

Petit Boucan, Gressier

In Petit Boucan the earthquake meant an increase in two types of actors: international NGOs and community-based organisations. After the earthquake, Petit Boucan experienced what a local official called an ‘NGO invasion’. Our study shows that many international relief agencies worked closely with the local community organisation ITECA, which had years of experience in working with the community and underlying structures, and also with international NGOs. Possibly because this local organisation was involved, the external interventions did not result in the creation of new committees of local inhabitants which happened in Tisous.

In the aftermath of the earthquake there was a proliferation of community organisations, or ‘January 12 Organisations’. These organisations include youth and religious organisations, and women’s *gwoupmans*. Although their resources are limited, these are ways in which people of Petit Boucan seek to fulfil their basic needs. Grassroots organisations are also important for conflict resolution (as indicated by a quarter of the seventy-two households in our study). Almost half of the inhabitants in the study indicated they were active members of grassroots organisations. Their faith in these organisations is best illustrated by the words of one of the residents, ‘Together we form our own government!’

The study found wide-spread awareness of the presence of international NGOs. This was in stark contrast with the awareness of the existence of a local government office (CASEC, Conseil d’Administration de la Section Communale): only a third of the inhabitants were aware of its

existence. Representatives of the local government indicate that they are unable to do much for the community, 'Without finances our hands are tied', they say. Local government lacks the necessary resources. As a result, local government is a marginal player in the local context, even taking into account the national government services present in Gressier, the city of which Petit Boucan is part. The local government finds it difficult to connect to local community organisations because, as representatives indicate, people expect something in return for their presence at meetings. To mitigate the picture of local state weakness, representatives of the local government indicate they play the role of 'toutiste', both policeman and judge, when their help is called for in cases of criminal behaviour. The earthquake did not weaken the local government in absolute terms, but as other actors rose to prominence, it can be said to have become more marginal in relative terms.

Tisous

The study in Tisous also found a strong contrast in visibility between the local state and the NGOs. Residents are generally unable to indicate which government institutions are present, and what they do. Only two out of fifty-three studied households are aware of the existence of a CASEC office; about two-thirds claim there are no public institutions at all. Similarly, more than half are unaware of the presence of state representatives in Tisous, and only a quarter of the households know one by name.

By contrast, most people in Tisous could easily name multiple international NGOs and their activities. There is a strong presence of international organisations delivering services (including Cordaid). The influx of these NGOs due to the earthquake has led to a shift in local governance structures. In the case of Tisous, these NGOs are new actors in the local arena, and work through newly-formed committees of local representatives. Interestingly, related research shows that these committees are often composed of people representing existing power structures: they include regional government officials (members of the ASEC and the CASEC), but also church leaders, Vodou priests and informal community leaders.¹²

For conflict resolution, community residents in Tisous turn to various mediators of their social (family, friends and neighbours) or religious (Catholic, Protestant and Vodou) affiliations instead of going to the state police (not present in the community) or other official authorities. In serious cases such as murder they go to the police Commissioner in Carrefour.

Mombin Crochu

In Mombin Crochu local governance arrangements were studied from the vantage point of land issues. Our study confirmed the relative marginality of the state as a land governance actor, though formal courts do come in with particularly protracted conflicts. We found several local government institutions present: the Mayor's office, CASEC, and ASEC (Administration des Sections Communales). However, according to community organisation GADRU, 'Local government institutions are present and absent at the same time. There is a local government, but that is not working, because there is no coordination, no money and no ideas'. The first Mayor of Mombin Crochu confirmed that there was a lack of transfer of authority and resources from

¹² For example Molenaar, L. (2011) 'Opportunities and obstacles concerning local partnerships in Cordaid's post-earthquake aid mission in Haiti', MSc thesis at Wageningen University; and Dolinski, A. (2011) 'Right people in the 'right' place: the land issues and post-disaster response in Haiti: the impact of the shelter programs on tenure security of the urban poor', MSc thesis at Wageningen University.

the national government. Peasants in Mombin Crochu do not consider the local government when they need help, and most cannot name any local government representative.

'Local government institutions are present and absent at the same time'

This image of the local government is confirmed in our study of its role in resolution of conflicts over land. Land is a primary source of food security in Haiti, and is under heavy pressure due to a long history of land parcelling. Land tenure in Haiti is governed by two parallel systems, one formal, the other informal: only the act of buying land comes under what could be called 'formal system rules'. When conflict arises (fifteen formal cases were found by Cecilia Signorini in 2011-2012, see the box), there is no specific and structured popular conflict resolution procedure. Traditionally, when the problem arises, people involved try to come together to find an agreement, usually within the family. When conflict goes beyond the household, elder people in the community can play a facilitating role, and so can the Justice et Paix committees of the Catholic Church. If no solution can be found, recourse is taken to the formal justice system.

Land conflicts in Mombin Crochu 2011-2012

Case 1: After the death of the grandparents, the heirs agreed to sell all the land to one of them who could afford it. When he died, his wife decided to leave and sell the land. As the relatives of her late husband could not afford to buy the land, she sold it to someone else from Mombin Crochu. Then the other heirs reclaimed their right to the land, stating that the lady did not have the right to sell it to an external person. In three years, the case was referred to the Court of First Instance in Fort Liberté, and recent developments include the burning of the grandparents' house by the new 'owner'.

Cases 2 & 3: One of the former mayors lends part of his land to friends who are in need, for them to work on and keep the harvest, free of charge. Similarly, local divisions of the Catholic church, Ti Legliz (little church), often provide vulnerable peasants with land to work on, for a free harvest. Agreements are always oral: however, Haitian law now entitles peasants to claim formal ownership over a piece of land, if they have worked it for over 20 years, thus threatening the property of the benefactors.

Conclusion

'In every nation's history, there comes a turning point - a moment of opportunity in which the people can choose to build a better future for themselves and for the generations that follow...'

Former US President Bill Clinton (2010).¹³

Was this the case in Haiti, was the opportunity seized to 'build back' a 'better' Haiti? Our studies suggest that for the government at the local level, the earthquake did not become the turning point Clinton describes here. Perhaps people in local government saw the opportunity, but they lacked the resources to seize it. Instead, how people coped with the disaster and gave shape to their human security remained largely based on the arrangements that had developed long before the earthquake, in response to the weakness of the central state.

Our research shows that people cope through the pre-earthquake arrangements: their families, community groups, and informal authorities. Most of these were not heavily affected by the earthquake, and these arrangements provide continuity to the organisation of social and economic life in Haiti, adapting to changing circumstances. Local government continues to play a marginal role, even in localities with less international presence, and the earthquake has perhaps reinforced this. International NGOs stepped up their aid efforts both in relief and in development work. This impacted governance at the local level, contributing mostly to a further eclipsing of the local government and, in some cases, this fostered a surge in new local community organisations.

If there was a real opportunity for change, it has been perhaps at this level of community-based arrangements, whether rooted in traditional kinship ties or in the emerging forms of development committees. Our study revealed that people spoke about these forms with pride and confidence. Perhaps later, in hindsight, we will be able to say that the real opportunity for change in Haiti was seized not by the state, but by the people.

Entrepreneurial strategies of rural women

The fifth study in this project analyses the organisation of trade between Haitian rural and urban areas. It focuses on Madam Saras, Haitian female intermediaries between rural producers and the urban consumers. In describing their strategies for dealing with multiple sources of uncertainty and insecurity, this study shows the resilience of these female entrepreneurs and their crucial role for the Haitian economy.

Stam, T. (2013). *From Gardens to Markets: a Madam Sara perspective*. IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States: Occasional Paper 04.

¹³ Clinton, W.J. (2010) 'Our commitment to Haiti', in: *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization*, MIT Press

Further reading: research reports

The following reports form the basis for this research brief. The two reports by Talitha Stam can be accessed via the Cordaid and IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States websites; the other reports are available upon request.

- Duclaire, Antoinette (2012). *Rural local governance and livelihood strategies in Petit Boucan, Gressier*
- Louis, Pheline (2012). *Urban local governance and access to basic services in Carrefour, Port-au-Prince*
- Signorini, Cecilia (2012). *Land system and peasant vulnerability in rural Haiti: the case of Mombin Crochu. Policy implications in the realm of Human Security*
- Stam, Talitha (2011). *Planting Strategies in rural Haiti: an ethnographic context*
- Stam, Talitha (2013). *From Gardens to Markets: a Madam Sara Perspective*

See also: *Haiti: A Woman of the Mountains* (2013), a film by Patricia Borns, in collaboration with Talitha Stam, available on the Cordaid website.

The Special Chair Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction focuses on the everyday politics and practices of service delivery, livelihoods and disaster risk reduction in the institutional landscapes of conflict- or disaster-affected areas. It engages in multi-sited qualitative and quantitative research. Research of Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction is collaborative, interacting with policy and practice throughout the process to enhance research uptake.

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