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"Tragedy and Opportunity for Haiti" by Kara C.
Mc Donald*

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February Roundtable: Introduction

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February Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"Tragedy and Opportunity for Haiti" by Kara C. Mc Donald. Council on Foreign Relations. January 14, 2010.

Keywords

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[“Tragedy and Opportunity for Haiti” by Kara C. McDonald. Council on Foreign Relations. January 14, 2010.](#)

An Annotation

The devastating impact of the earthquake in Haiti raises the fundamental question of whether or not the international community has the responsibility, political will, and capacity to deal effectively, and in a humane manner, with humanitarian crisis. As international aid pours into Haiti, this month's Roundtable examines what might be the best way to help fragile states like Haiti overcome chronic economic, political, and social vulnerabilities. These are long-term problems requiring sustained international attention; such challenges are unlikely to be met if the focus is exclusively on the context of crises within countries that are poorly protected against natural catastrophes. The centerpiece by Kara McDonald portrays the earthquake as a “tragedy and opportunity for Haiti,” indicating that **“the desire to move fast and 'do something' must be matched to what is a bitter opportunity to secure a more consistent and lasting commitment to Haiti's political and social stability. Above all, this disaster is a reminder that the patchwork response to Haiti's problems that ebbs and flows with its crises must end now.”**

As our panelists warn in their contributions, there is a current fear that a long-term humanitarian disaster might be on Haiti's horizon unless international actors are able to break with past patterns of international interventions. After decades of international involvement in Haiti, this Caribbean country remains the hungriest country in the world after Somalia and Afghanistan, ranking 149 out of 182 countries on the United Nations Development Index. According to the historical record, Haiti's future could resemble the same old failed international strategies. As McDonald puts it, **“...it is hard to identify another country that has had as many peacekeeping forces, stabilization operations, and crisis responses at work in the last three decades. The quake must not become yet another opportunity to fail.”**

What should be the right response this time? Our contributors provide a number of recommendations for current international efforts to rebuild Haiti, including:

Rethinking development aid. What constitutes development aid needs to be fundamentally reevaluated and re-conceptualized in Haiti and more generally, as Anthony Chase points out. Past relief and development strategies did not function properly; to insist otherwise is to condemn Haitian people to the same story of hunger, disease, and desperation. More of the same strategies do not seem to be a viable alternative at this point.

From charity to a human rights-based development approach. Past international interventions in Haiti were managed largely through the lens of charity. Understanding that charity alone does not provide a path for sustainable development is fundamental to the current humanitarian efforts there. Implementing a human rights-based development approach requires that the international community, state and non-state actors, focus their state-building efforts on Haitians as individual human beings entitled to human rights and put them at the center of political and economic development strategies. This would empower the Haitian community and build a more inclusive society as well as stronger state institutions. Several international organizations working on relief

efforts are already trying to significantly include human rights considerations in their mandates to respond to the current situation in Haiti, as Anna Talbot points out in her piece.

Innovative solutions for fragile states. The recurrent failure of the old patterns of state-building efforts in Haiti prompts experts to think about innovative ways to address the same old problems. Richard Burchill, for example, calls for the international community to temporarily take over the Haitian state in order to assure the development of governmental and societal institutions. Needless to say, there might be strong opposition to this idea given the history of international intervention in Haiti and the prevailing international norms with respect to sovereignty and non-intervention.

These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.