

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 10
Issue 3 February Roundtable: An Annotation of
"Tragedy and Opportunity for Haiti" by Kara C.
Mc Donald

Article 3

2-1-2010

A Time for Anger. And a Time for Rights, Not Charity

Anthony Chase
Occidental College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chase, Anthony (2010) "A Time for Anger. And a Time for Rights, Not Charity," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss3/3>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

A Time for Anger. And a Time for Rights, Not Charity

Abstract

Sadness but also anger is the immediate reaction to the deaths of 200,000 Haitians. Among the dead are Myriam Merlet, Magalie Marcelin and Anne Marie Coriolan (founders of three leading Haitian feminist organizations) and 14 of the 16 members of SEROvie, the main Haitian organization providing HIV-related services for men who have sex with men and the transgendered – people who have been at the front line in pushing for political change from within Haiti. Kara McDonald's words that "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" add to the anger over the ineffectiveness of domestic governance and international aid that has outweighed the efforts of such local activists.

Keywords

Human rights, Haiti, Humanitarian aid, Natural disasters, Development, Charity, Systemic change

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

A Time for Anger. And a Time for Rights, Not Charity

by Anthony Chase

Sadness but also anger is the immediate reaction to the deaths of 200,000 Haitians. Among the dead are Myriam Merlet, Magalie Marcelin and Anne Marie Coriolan ([founders of three leading Haitian feminist organizations](#)) and 14 of the 16 members of [SEROvie](#), the main Haitian organization providing HIV-related services for men who have sex with men and the transgendered – people who have been at the front line in pushing for political change from within Haiti. Kara McDonald’s words that “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” add to the anger over the ineffectiveness of domestic governance and international aid that has outweighed the efforts of such local activists. Anger against corrupt domestic elites that have profited from the processes that sustain Haiti’s poverty and underdevelopment. Anger at a destructive superpower in the immediate neighborhood that has systematically disempowered Haiti for over [two centuries](#). Anger at international organizations that have been complicit in providing charity rather than change. And anger at transnational NGOs that, similarly, have raised money and reputations based on good works –good works that have largely ignored structures that cause Haiti to be so vulnerable to poverty and natural disasters, and so dependent on charity.

What should be the response? This is, of course, a time when charity is needed. Needs are immediate and massive and cannot be provided for solely from within Haiti. This is also, however, a time when, for the long-term, the charity enterprise has to be questioned. Earthquakes happen, but this particular earthquake exposed not just literal fault lines, but also figurative fault lines: the systemic violation of rights that produce populations vulnerable to natural disasters, and also to the deadly poverty of everyday life that takes place outside the glare of international media and which local activists and NGOs (such as those mentioned above) are best positioned to address.

Does that mean that aid should be stopped, as [some argue](#)? Absolutely not. It is naïve to act as if any country exists in isolation. This is particularly so when outside forces have been complicit in creating Haiti’s underdevelopment and, thus, have a responsibility to help reverse it.

It does mean, however, that what constitutes development aid needs to be subject to a fundamental critique in Haiti as well as more generally. The billions that have come to Haiti over the past decades have gone into everything from military missions, military assistance, infrastructure, governance programs, and community-based aid. Much of this has been well intentioned. And, undoubtedly, much of this has done good in the immediate. Some (even many) individuals have been helped and, perhaps, that is all that can be done in terms of outside solidarity. But it has not changed Haiti’s underlying political and economic underdevelopment. More of the same is not good enough. Let’s not kid ourselves that [tinkering with aid levels](#) will change anything fundamental; indeed it risks simply further entrenching the status quo.

The irony is that the critique of development aid as something that does not accomplish its goals is not novel. The UNDP Human Development Reports in the 1990s and Kofi Annan’s call for

human rights to be mainstreamed into the work of all U.N. agencies were preceded by pioneering work on human rights-based approaches to development as fundamental to producing outcomes that sustain equitable and dynamic development, in contrast to charity and resource transfer models. And, as a result, many of the largest donors now make pro forma nods toward the importance of governance, transparency, and human rights, and undoubtedly will make more such nods to accompany new flows of aid that will be directed toward Haiti.

What is shocking, however, is how little has actually changed. Whether it be the United States under Obama, the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), or transnational NGOs that work in Haiti such as Partners in Health (PIH), there is much rhetoric about stakeholders and working with the community and human rights. The reality in Haiti as elsewhere, however, is that most often this rhetoric has just been a new bottle from which the same old wine has been dispensed, leaving untouched issues of governance and rights-based empowerment. That failed model needs to be dispensed with once and forever.

There are two alternatives. One, simply provide charity and be honest that such charity will not change much in Haiti or in other places around the globe, but it can ameliorate immediate suffering and that, in itself, is worthy. Two, place human rights at the center of the development enterprise such that it becomes less about saviors from abroad and more about empowering people on the ground so that they can seize their own economic and political destinies. And this returns us to grieving for the sorts of activists I mentioned at the start of this piece who had been working to put Haitians [at the center of political and economic development](#), and who so tragically were among the earthquake's victims. They leave, however, a worthy legacy: that the sort of rights-based empowerment at the center of their work is what must be the focus of development, not charity.

Anthony Tirado Chase is Associate Professor of Diplomacy & World Affairs at Occidental College. Chase is currently completing [Human Rights Debates in the Transnational Muslim World: Politics, Economics, and Society](#). Drawing on Professor Chase's training in international law, Islamic law, and international relations theory, this book explores when, how, and why the international human rights regime has mattered to some of the transnational Muslim world's most important debates - including those over free expression, economic development, and the treatment of sexual minorities. Other forthcoming works include "Mutual Renewal: On the Relationship of Human Rights to the Muslim World" and "On Justifications for Human Rights in Difficult Circumstances: Why 'Pushing the Envelope' is Essential to Human Rights Continued Global Resonance," each scheduled to be published as chapters in edited volumes. Previous works include [Human Rights in the Arab World: Independent Voices](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press), a range of peer reviewed articles, and guest editorship of a Muslim World Journal of Human Rights special volume on [The Transnational Muslim World, Human Rights, and the Rights of Women and Sexual Minorities](#).