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The Perils of Walking Fast and Walking Far

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The Perils of Walking Fast and Walking Far

Abstract

When Haitian President René Préval early in January 2011 lambasted the international community for riding roughshod over his country's sovereignty and his government, and called for greater Haitian ownership over the aid and recovery effort in his country, he highlighted a frustration which has been noted by so many other nations before: while international aid efforts are welcome and usually do provide critical relief to the targeted populations in the short term, they generally tend to undermine governments (and the faith of the people in their government) over the long term.

Keywords

Human rights, Haiti, Natural disasters, Sovereignty, Humanitarian aid, Elections, United Nations

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The Perils of Walking Fast and Walking Far

by Walter Lotze

When Haitian President René Préal early in January 2011 lambasted the international community for riding roughshod over his country's sovereignty and his government, and called for greater Haitian ownership over the aid and recovery effort in his country, he highlighted a frustration which has been noted by so many other nations before: while international aid efforts are welcome and usually do provide critical relief to the targeted populations in the short term, they generally tend to undermine governments (and the faith of the people in their government) over the long term.

Thus, while the presidential candidates prepare to grab power during the runoff election scheduled for February 2011, and tensions mount over the outcomes of the first round of voting (the UN and the international community were satisfied with the first round of voting, while most Haitians, including most presidential candidates, were not), it remains quite unclear what degree of control a new government in Haiti will have. Indeed, many aid organizations actively work to minimize their engagement with the government, while development partners are known to symbolically promote the government in all their partnerships, only to do whatever they deem most appropriate or what will best promote the national interest of the day.

The UN mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), too, struggles to strike the right balance: attain its mandate in support of the government, while minimizing affiliation with a government that mission personnel by and large deem weak, ineffective, and corrupt. It is these tensions that in the previous months resulted in accusations that the Americans had annexed the international airport, that aid workers have kidnapped children and driven them across the border to the Dominican Republic, that aid is benefitting the elite and bypassing the disempowered, and that MINUSTAH introduced cholera to the island. Whether these accusations are true or not, what is true is that the international aid effort has propped up a government despised by many Haitians, created a bubble in the economy and driven up costs, and alienated many Haitians from their government and from each other. Seeing black and white SUVs cruising the streets, foreigners lounging on beaches, and the arrival of *chique* restaurants designed to absorb all those per diems certainly does not make ordinary Haitians feel warm and fuzzy towards the "international community," the UN included.

Sadly, the story is every little bit as new as it is unique to Haiti. In Monrovia, no fewer than four sushi restaurants and some excellent Italian and Lebanese eateries sprung up with the arrival of UNMIL, the UN mission in Liberia. All have white SUVs parked outside every evening. This at a time when the UN is planning to draw down its peace support operation in Liberia and the government is fast losing credibility over its inability to deliver to the Liberian people. Expectations have been elevated so highly by the large international presence that the government will be hard-pressed to deliver on even a proportion of them. The Liberian people will surely take their anger out on someone. The story is no different elsewhere. In Juba, southern Sudan, brick and mortar hotels have sprung up at an incredible pace while the local population is left without shelter, roads, water, or healthcare. Internationals can dine on fine Italian fare while watching the sun set over the Nile River, while locals struggle to purchase fresh water trucked in from Uganda and Kenya. In the Eastern Democratic Republic of the

Congo, foreigners enjoy sumptuous barbecues and all-night dancing near the border with Rwanda, while locals spend nights camping on the forest floor, for fear of rebel raids on their villages.

While the international community has been quite adept at riding roughshod over sensitivities and riling local resentment, at the same time it has been very adept at undermining local authorities and leaving governments looking weak and ineffective. While governments may indeed be weak and ineffective during times of crisis, bypassing them on the basis of humanitarian need and then publicly showing off flashy lifestyles while locals trudge in the mud does not help to build the credibility of governments and local civil society actors. While the justification for these actions is often that following local rules and working with local actors would slow down the delivery of much-needed assistance, which in all likelihood is true, the result is that we further weaken the capacity of local actors to drive national processes, be this the delivery of humanitarian assistance, the coordination of elections, or implementing long term recovery strategies. When the internationals finally do leave, the resilience and durability of what is left in place quickly comes into question.

For the next Haitian president, life will not be easy. He will need to be seen by the Haitian people to be far more assertive with the international community so present in the country without alienating the internationals that provide such critical support to Haitians who still remain in desperate need. If the balance is not struck just right, Haitians could soon be throwing more than just refuse and rubble at MINUSTAH and the Haitian government. In Kirundi, a popular expression asserts that those who wish to walk fast should walk alone, while those who wish to walk far should walk together. Both the Haitian government and those constituting the international presence in Haiti would be wise to jointly consider whether they wish to walk fast, or far.

Walter Lotze (South African) is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) in Oslo, Norway. Prior to joining NUPI, Walter worked in the Peace Support Operations Division of the African Union Commission, prior to which he headed the Peacebuilding Division at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), a non-governmental organization working in conflict situations across the African continent. Walter recently completed his PhD in International Relations with the University of St Andrews in Scotland.