

The 'phantom state' of Haiti

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The fragile nature of the state had turned emigration into a major feature of Haitian life even before the earthquake displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

The January 2010 earthquake dealt Haiti – an already fragile state, which ordinary Haitians refer to as 'the phantom state' – a devastating blow. Public buildings, power plants, the electricity grid, the sewer system, roads, telephone lines, water treatment works, hospitals and schools were either destroyed or severely damaged.

Haiti is one of the weakest states in the world and registers the lowest human development in the Western Hemisphere and among the lowest in the world. The Haitian state is unable to fulfill even the most rudimentary functions of a modern state including the delivery of core public services (security, health, housing sanitation, energy, education), the development of essential infrastructure and the administration of the rule of law. The state is unable to collect taxes and lacks a working bureaucracy. Most of the population works in the informal sector. The country also suffers from severe environmental degradation and resource depletion associated with vertiginous population growth.

The iconic images of desperate Haitians attempting to reach Florida in improvised boats to escape the reign of terror that followed the overthrow of President Aristide in 1991 raised awareness of the plight of Haitians. One million Haitians live in the Dominican Republic and there are sizeable Haitian communities in Canada, the US, France and Latin America. While most are considered economic migrants, repression and human rights abuses have resulted in significant migration flows. In addition, economic collapse and a seemingly endless litany of natural disasters have created existential threats for the population, forcing thousands to abandon their home communities.

The root sources of Haiti's dysfunctional state can be traced back through a complex historical process dating back to before even the 1804 revolution that made Haiti the first slave colony to achieve independence. More recently the dysfunctional process of state formation expressed itself in a chaotic pattern of urbanisation. Newcomers to the capital, Port au Prince, were mostly poor peasants forced to leave their communities as a result of the collapse of the agrarian economy, who settled on unclaimed land around the city. Huge, overcrowded slums characterised by sub-standard building conditions popped up around the city. Not surprisingly, the earthquake disproportionately affected these disadvantaged communities. The vulnerability of Haiti's population magnified the destruction of an earthquake of otherwise unremarkable power.

One manifestation of the relationship between state fragility and displacement was the total inability of the state to react to the crisis and assist and protect its population after the earthquake. The state was incapable of organising search and rescue operations; without clear leadership, survivors had to fend for themselves. Lacking a national army, Haiti did not have a unified force with even moderate technological capabilities, heavy equipment and a clear chain of command capable of leading the rescue effort. A frail health system cracked after being inundated by thousands upon thousands of victims seeking urgent help. Many people who could have survived did not as they did not receive medical



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assistance. The state was not even capable of retrieving the bodies of victims, and assistance began in earnest only with the arrival of international help several days later.

How uprooting weakens the state

Uprooting of such proportions predictably had a crippling effect on Haitian society and on the state. In the capital alone a third of the population was rendered homeless. While many sought shelter with relatives and friends, many thousands of people spontaneously sought shelter in parks, squares, streets and open spaces. According to the Haitian Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, at the peak of the crisis there were up to 1,555 camps of diverse sizes and shapes holding 1.5 million internally displaced people.

As of October 2012, almost three years after the disaster, 496 camps remained open and 358,000 people were still displaced. A fragile state has been incapable of fixing the problems. Most residents of the camps are without work and lack the means to support

their families. The majority of children do not attend school because their families lack the means to send them there. Camps are overcrowded, lack electricity and running water, and have awful sanitary conditions. In Golgotha, a typical camp, there was one shower for every 1,200 people and one working latrine for every 77 people.

Security conditions inside the camps have also allowed women and young girls to be systematically beaten and raped by armed men. Victims neither have access to medical treatment nor to accessible, effective judicial recourse, something that has fostered more attacks and perpetuated general conditions of impunity. Many camp residents have also been threatened with eviction, lured to abandon camps in exchange for meagre payments or violently evicted by armed thugs sent in by landowners eager to reclaim their property, three quarters of camps and settlements having been set up on private land.

In addition, the disaster and the ensuing humanitarian crisis had a severe psychological



20-year-old Shirley [not real name] lost her mother and aunt in the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. With no place to go, she moved into one of the sprawling tent camps in the capital, Port-au-Prince. One night she came back to her tent to escape the rain. A man approached her and asked to go inside. She said he hit her and pushed her into the tent: "He threw me to the ground and raped me... The tents are not secure. Anyone with a razor or knife can cut the tent and come inside. There are no walls and no protection and before you know it someone is there in your tent."

impact on a significant part of the population; many Haitians, in particular the children, are severely traumatised from having experienced personal losses, endured terrible injuries and suffered the breakdown of their normal existence after losing their homes and belongings. Their predicament has been made worse by the systematic human rights violations and by the grim prospects for recovery.

Massive displacement has further debilitated the Haitian state in several other ways. Most obviously, the humanitarian catastrophe prompted the state to devote most of its limited material and human resources to addressing the immediate crisis, thus forcing it to postpone dealing with other urgent problems. More profoundly, displacement has had a negative impact on Haitian society by furthering marginality and promoting a culture of dependency. In his report to the UN Human Rights Council, Michel Forst, the UN's human rights expert in Haiti, warned that: "Although the camps were an appropriate response to an emergency situation, one can only wonder whether they have now contributed to the emergence of a new kind of social organization that might create more problems than it solves."

Displacement and state building

Displacement creates formidable challenges to state-building processes. In addition to distracting badly needed resources, massive displacement often pushes peacebuilding off the agenda as all efforts coalesce around tackling acute humanitarian needs. Public policies are often made in a haze and under great pressure in this context. The Haitian authorities have been obliged to channel resources to improving security in the camps and dealing with tensions created by violent evictions. This meant reassigning police away from communities afflicted by acute levels of violence. Uprooting also raised social tensions and resentment between the displaced and pauperised urban dwellers who were not directly affected by the disaster and therefore not eligible for special aid programmes. The critical housing situation

also forced the Haitian authorities to develop plans in a rush. The authorities opted for depopulating rather than revitalising urban areas, arguing that the emergency provided an opportunity for rural revitalisation and industrial de-centralisation. In the midst of the grave humanitarian crisis and mass displacement that the country was experiencing, no coherent plan emerged, only piecemeal efforts that were clearly not good enough and paid scant attention to people's needs and wishes. State fragility also undermined reconstruction efforts because, in the absence of reliable local state counterparts, programmes were almost exclusively channelled through non-governmental organisations which often lacked the resources and expertise to carry out such challenging tasks.

The destruction and misery brought about by the earthquake, in particular the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of people who continue to endure inhumane conditions, is a chilling reminder of the circular relationship between state fragility and forced migration. State fragility creates the conditions for uprooting, which in turn further undermines state capacity by sapping the state's few available resources. However resourceful the Haitian population proves itself to be, its chances of finding lasting solutions to its problems are slim against the backdrop of a 'phantom state'. It is therefore critical that all actors involved, whether in responses to displacement or in promoting the development of the country, work on ways to strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of the Haitian state.

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