**United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee**

**Strategy for meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas**

**Case Study**

**Urban challenges in the humanitarian response to the 12 January 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti**

**I. Objective and Scope**

1. The overall objective of the case studies is to understand the urban challenges encountered by humanitarian actors in selected cities affected by crisis of different nature. While specific field reviews took place in Manila, Nairobi and Eldoret to prepare a comprehensive study of the tools and methodologies employed by IASC member agencies and learn from their experiences, the Port-au-Prince case study is limited to a broad review of the urban challenges recently experienced by several stakeholders of the humanitarian response after the 12 January 2010 earthquake, including IASC members.

2. Post natural disaster broad humanitarian challenges are always almost similar: (a) extracting survivors and saving lives of people injured in the immediate aftermath of the disaster; (b) quickly disposing of dead bodies and providing food and basic services such as water, sanitation, emergency shelters, energy, communications, protection and security to survivors and (c) then embarking in transitional provision of assistance and support to affected population that will drive to recovery and then reconstruction phase.

3. Key contextual elements to be considered for the humanitarian response to an earthquake relate to landscape physical patterns, human occupation, existing infrastructure, poor/rich, disseminated villages, large/small cities, construction density, land availability and settlement patterns, national and local governance and capacities, level of organisation of communities, recurrence of earthquake and preparedness. All these factors, generally interrelated, affect both the impact of the earthquake and the humanitarian response.

4. Populations and local stakeholders always play a key role in reacting and responding to above mentioned challenges, whatever the level of support provided by the Government and international actors: as first respondent, they are key elements for saving lives and mobilizing locally available resources and services, moving to perceived safe areas, etc.

5. Due to the unique situation in recent history of having a multimillionaire and complex capital city tremendously affected by such a disaster and considering the number of people affected in Port-au-Prince, the below analysis does not take into account the situation in Haitian affected secondary cities.

**II. Methodology**

6. This desk review of the urban challenges in Port-au-Prince was done in September 2010. It is based on the report on the Inter-agency real time evaluation in Haiti: three months after prepared by Groupe URD and GPPi, the IASC report “Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti” written six months after the 12 January earthquake, as well as on UN-HABITAT and Groupe URD internal documentation. Eight months after the disaster, the humanitarian phase is shifting to recovery and reconstruction challenges. Broad recommendations emphasized by above mentioned reports are specified here from an urban disaster perspective. An analysis of the operational and policy challenges in Port-au-Prince and of the impact of immediate relief decisions on recovery and reconstruction phase and their sustainability is provided.

**III. The Earthquake Context**

**Pre-earthquake situation**

***Urban challenges***

7. Due to poor urban planning, management and governance and lack of investment in services, rapid urban development was mainly driven for decades by the creation, densification and extension of slums and informal settlements. Before the earthquake, it is estimated that 80% of the population of Port-au-Prince was living in informal, underserviced and poor settlements occupying only 20% of the urban territory (dense neighbourhoods within a horizontal sprawling city). This chaotic urban development took place on public land, private land informally rented to occupants, slopping sites at risk and areas subject to flooding. They are located nearby employment areas as walking is the only affordable daily way of transportation for the majority. With a high level of space segregation, insecurity was prevailing and poor neighbourhoods were permanently at threat of political violence.

8. Access to livelihood opportunities and services is even worst in secondary cities and rural areas with the result of hindering economic investment and pushing migrants to Port-au-Prince where most opportunities and services are concentrated.

***Disaster vulnerability and preparedness***

9. Haiti is a country at risk both for earthquakes and hurricanes. Hurricanes hit the country almost every year but, due to mountainous sites, risks related to strong wings seem to be relatively lower in Port-au-Prince than in other parts of the country. However, very slopping backside and flat coastal line and river basins make it highly vulnerable to heavy rains and flooding. Port-au-Prince is partially located on an important crush fault line and it was destroyed twice during the eighteenth century. The whole city is therefore considered highly at risk for natural disasters due to both physical configuration and high vulnerability of dense informal settlements.

10. The most recurrent threat was the one from hurricanes and popular commercial and residential constructions are purposely made of filled reinforced concrete structure and heavy slabs that will also be used for incremental erection of additional floors. Poor quality of building materials and inadequate construction techniques affects the resistance of most popular building erected by unskilled labour. Absence of building standards and soil resistance maps, lack of skilled labour and control do not guarantee earthquake resistance of most modern buildings.

11. In this context, the international community supported the Government to develop the civil protection administration under the Ministry of Interior in the last five years, in order to address disaster preparedness and organization of emergency response. Civil protection central department is branched into local administration at regional and municipal levels. It was mainly focusing on hurricane vulnerability (i.e. annual drainage cleaning) with poor consideration of earthquake vulnerability.

**Earthquake impact in Port-au-Prince**

12. The earthquake, which is estimated to have killed more than 220,000 people, injured about 300,000 people and destroyed or severely damaged more than 310,000 houses, mainly affected the capital city, Port-au-Prince, with an estimated population over 3 million, and many secondary cities in southern and western regions. The total directly affected population is estimated at 3 million, which is about one third of the total country population. About one third of the capital city was heavily affected, including the central district with the main commercial, Ministries and administrative buildings and the harbour. About 5,000 schools and 60% of the hospitals were either damaged or destroyed. Communications, transport, water, sanitation and energy infrastructure were severely affected. Deaths, injuries and homelessness were far larger than in other recent earthquakes of similar magnitude, primarily because it crippled a poor mega city[[1]](#footnote-1).

13. As a result of destruction, fear to return into unsafe houses and slow response for reconstruction, more than one million people are still living under tents eight months after the disaster. Tents are located on private residential plots where possible but, as most affected people originate from dense informal neighbourhoods, the majority invaded open space including public spaces (parks and squares, streets, yards of public equipments and churches) . Some of these sites are vulnerable to risks. Some moved to more organized camps far away but where more assistance is available.

14. About 600,000 people migrated from affected areas and mostly moved back to their city or village of origin. However, due to lack of livelihood opportunities and with the reopening of less damaged schools in Port-au-Prince, many have already returned despite difficult living conditions. Fear for being dispossessed from informal properties and belonging also probably played an important role in people’s return. In most cases, families follow different simultaneous strategies, i.e. keeping part of the family in their region of origin while another part remains in Port-au-Prince for securing properties and trying to earn revenues. Families and individuals are applying here a notion in economics named ‘opportunity cost’, expressing the basic relationship between [scarcity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarcity) and [choice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utility).

**IV. Humanitarian Challenges**

***Identifying the challenges in Port-au-Prince context***

15. In poor countries with weak state environments like Haiti, most people strongly rely on their community environment for their protection, housing, access to basic services and livelihood. In Port-au-Prince, a myriad of non-state actors, including community organizations, churches, the small private sector and international NGOs provide education and health services, water and sanitation infrastructure and all type of services. As all services and utility buildings are interrelated, urban specialists recommend an integrated approach at city and neighbourhood levels for improving living conditions of the majority living in slums and other informal settlements.

16. After disasters hitting poor cities, whatever the level of international and national support mobilized, communities at large – including the informal and small private sector, are key actors. A strong approach placing communities at the core of immediate humanitarian and following phases should therefore be systematically designed in contingency plans and post-natural disaster urban situations.

17. Whether or not a humanitarian response can have a positive effect in the long term is determined by how well the situation, needs and capacities are assessed and understood[[2]](#footnote-2). In the immediate disaster aftermath phase, key activities that should involve communities and municipalities include mapping and assessment of disaster impacts, facilitating access to poor neighbourhoods, identifying and involving community leaders, identifying rapidly changing needs, understanding how services were provided before the disaster, securing and organizing assistance and ensuring access for vulnerable groups and people.

18. Another crucial issue is the place where and the way emergency services are distributed and the way affected people are registered, mainly under international stakeholders’ coordination. These are powerful pulling factors both for people’s survival reactions and moves that should support an integrated strategy aiming at maximizing the benefit of the assistance, ensuring that vulnerable people and groups get access to assistance, facilitating future recovery and reconstruction strategies and for the recovery of the informal and small private sector that plays a key role in the urban livelihood of the poor. A community-based registration system anchored in neighbourhoods, versus in camps, provides an integrated assessment of casualties and needs in addition of keeping community networking strengths that are crucial for both way information and support distribution.

19. Responding to such challenges in a complex urban territory requires: (a) a strong strategic vision and related action plans, based on solid situation analysis and (b) an integrated coordination and information platform at different territorial levels for involving all stakeholders, including community representatives at neighbourhood level. Such strategic vision and coordination platform should be quickly designed by international and national decision-makers to flexibly address changing needs and design a continuum of actions from the immediate emergency phase towards recovery and reconstruction,

**How these challenges were met**

20. The immediate response to this exceptional disaster was particularly constrained due to affected capacities in all Government spheres as well as in IASC member agencies and all urban and humanitarian actors. However, in the immediate emergency and initial stabilization phases, the overall international response, including the current Humanitarian Coordination System, other humanitarian actors, the MINUSTAH and foreign armies, was successful in quickly mobilizing aid, setting up cluster coordination and mobilizing important resources in the form of money, military logistic and staff[[3]](#footnote-3) that highly contributed to avoid epidemics, social troubles and insecurity.

21. However, several factors delayed the response and left a large series of uncovered gaps, including the lack of experience and adapted approach to an urban disaster and the weak assessment of the humanitarian situation and needs[[4]](#footnote-4). Most good achievements were witnessed in sectors where a strategic vision and network of actors under national leadership and with strong community approach were pre-existing, such as drinking water distribution.

22. Both above described integrated strategic vision and integrated coordination and information framework were missing[[5]](#footnote-5) in the response and are still largely missing in Haiti.

23. The UN Humanitarian Coordination leadership and the Global Cluster System were not conscious of the need for urban specialized expertise to prepare such strategic vision and organize the involvement and coordination of urban stakeholders at community and city levels. The absence of pre-disaster integrated policy frameworks, action plans, and coordination platforms on urban issues and slums did not facilitate the involvement (and influence) of different skilled actors in the coordinated response.

24. On the side of the Government, weak coordination capacities and credibility as well as divergent opinions on the strategic objective of helping people to return safely to informal settlements of origin (called illegal in the administrative language) and building back better did not allow for clear leadership. Inappropriate urban, public utilities and housing models for the large majority of Haitian were also and still are diverting the attention of national experts and Government.

25. The coordinated and organized international response was therefore driven by experiences that did not affect large cities or by military strategies. In this context, main issues relate to:

* Very limited interaction with national and local governments, communities and the local private sector, leading to supply-driven approach with increased negative impacts on pre-existing capacities. Many actors and decision makers in the international community did not even speak French and therefore could not engage directly with Haitian counterparts and partners. Most of the key meetings were conducted in English among the international community with extremely limited or no presence of Haitian counterparts.
* Implementation of a large number of need assessments of varying scope neglecting context analysis, including local capacities and constraints[[6]](#footnote-6), bringing confusion and biased assumptions (i.e. on security or on vulnerability to hazards), and unable to capture the rapidly moving situation in an urban context. Quite accurate assessments conducted by communities and local authorities were not taken into consideration, the international community considering them as unreliable and bias;
* A camp approach with a registration system of affected populations centred on large self-settled and organized camps rather than neighbourhoods of origin generated partial and wrong information, expectations to receive services, and created dependency. It is now hampering return to sites of origin by concentrating the distribution of support and aid in the camps;
* Inadequate reliance on satellite imagery to capture complex quake impact on built environments ;
* Uncoordinated actions of major national and international actors such as the detailed damage assessment conducted under the Ministry of Public Works in total disconnection with socioeconomic features and without communication with communities, owners and previous occupants, resulting in having people fearing to return to safe houses while others still occupying dangerous buildings;
* Over-evaluation of needs for transitional shelter based on supply-driven approach without space to erect it in dense settlements. This diverted resources from housing repairs and reconstruction of safe basic units that would have boosted the local economy and reinforced local livelihood.
* The establishment of periurban camps without clear strategy to develop permanent settlements is contributing to chaotic urban sprawl[[7]](#footnote-7).
* Emergency and humanitarian relief activities did not contribute to shape recovery and reconstruction strategies.

**Achievements of the transition phase**

26. During the last eight months, the advocacy work achieved by international and national urban actors in different coordination mechanisms (Early Recovery sub-Cluster on housing and neighbourhoods, UN Integrated Strategic Framework, Haitian President Commission to empty the main public park in front of the national palace, Prime Minister commission on housing reconstruction and resettlement, Secretariat of the “Comité Interministériel pour l’Aménagement du Territoire”, Ministry of Planning and External Cooperation) incrementally built the consensus on the safe return and building back better strategy.

27. Initial concepts drafted in the immediate aftermath of the disaster were further developed and are incrementally becoming operational. International agencies and large NGOs are progressively “adopting” affected neighbourhoods and their associated camps to implement integrated, coordinated and common methodologies and tools (integrated assessment of damages, tenure enumeration, people registration, local risk mapping, rubble removal and processing, etc.). These operational partners include UN-HABITAT, the World Bank, IOM, Habitat for Humanity, Agence Française de Développement - AFD, Emergency Architects, the Pan American Development Foundation, CHF, CRS as well as various local partnering organizations including the Association of Legal Professionals. Municipalities and line Ministries are fully associated. Together with the incremental resource mobilization for housing repair, these transitional activities are paving the way for neighbourhood reconstruction plans that will include urban restructuring at neighbourhood level.

28. As the overall strategy is also gaining consensus in Government spheres, cross-cutting issues are addressed by coalitions of partners under the leadership of line Ministries and bodies, including land management, reorganization of the school site map with UNICEF support, debris management strategy with the UNDP-UNHABITAT-ILO project newly funded by the Haiti Reconstruction Fund as decided by the Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti who also approved the support project to the National Centre for Geographic Information to build a geo-referenced overall database to track progress and gaps with UNHABITAT-UNOSAT support.

29. Another important exercise launched in July by the Ministry of Planning and External Cooperation with the support of UN-HABITAT, UNDP and the World Bank, is the participatory preparation of urban strategic plans to guide the reconstruction programmes within a long-term perspective framework in Port-au-Prince metropolitan region and in 6 secondary cities directly affected by the earthquake or identified as regional development poles for balancing Port-au-Prince demographic predominance (Léogane-Petit Goâve and Jacmel-Marigot urban axes, Cap-Haïtien, Les Cayes, Hinche and Gonaïves). The first participatory drafting charette took place in July for Port-au-Prince, building on preparatory work organized in Puerto Rico by the Coalition of Caribbean Urbanists. It recognizes three levels for urban strategic planning: the metropolitan region, the Municipalities and more importantly and for the first time, the neighbourhood level, including slums and other informal settlements with the key issue of improving quality of life and their integration to the city. It confirmed the multinuclear and more compact development model identified in the 2003 strategic plan to guide the development towards a 5 million metropolitan area population. It also drafted some basis for the reconstruction of the city centre and the development of the new north urban pole to accommodate a large number of people who cannot safely return to their neighbourhood of origin. Similar exercises will be launched in the 6 secondary cities with the aim of inputting to the National Territorial Development Plan that will be prepared in 2011 as part of the operationalization of the Action Plan for the Recovery and the Development of Haiti presented by the Government to the New-York reconstruction conference.

**Emerging challenges for the reconstruction**

30. The national consensus for supporting the safe return and building back better strategy in affected cities, recently reaffirmed by President Preval[[8]](#footnote-8), and for rebuilding the country will help testing and documenting new approaches for more equitable land management, re-planning and integration of poor informal neighbourhoods, more equitable territorial development and effective decentralization, that will require significant and long-standing political will and financial resources.

31. Subject to reconfirmation by the new Government arising from the November 2010 national elections, this optimistic scenario will require meeting various challenges in order to be realized.

32. As most reconstruction resources will be mobilized by various stakeholders and channelled out of the Haiti Reconstruction Fund controlled by the Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti, the coordination capacity and the policy leadership of the central and local Governments at their respective levels need to be tremendously reinforced for a long period. The government needs to be supported to mobilise all those who will implement reconstruction programmes in parallel to the projects funded by the Haiti Reconstruction Fund, in order to develop common visions preventing conflicting approaches and inequity.

33. Another financial challenge is the capacity to massively invest in basic services throughout the country to improve living conditions, mitigate all kind of risks and create a facilitating environment for private investment and subsequent employment for balancing the attraction of the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area. The action plan presented by the Government in March aims at reorienting the development of the entire country but, due to enormous needs for the reconstruction, there is a risk that most international support continues to be mainly directed to directly affected areas. Channelling investors to other parts of the territory will take time and the reconstruction economy will probably boost the demographic development of Port-au-Prince by reinforcing its attractiveness.

34. Equitability in accessing reconstruction resources is also complex, all the more since housing falls mainly within the individual and a private sector spheres. Discussions are taking place with the Government to ensure standard support packages to all affected households, irrespectively of their previous tenure status and losses. Such standard packages, based on the cost of a new basic housing unit and standard repairs, would be linked to earthquake and hurricane resistant standards and completed by technical support and training of construction actors. Such an equitable approach is gaining credibility among international and national reconstruction actors but it is not yet approved by the Government. In terms of value, building owners have lost more than tenants for example and, as claimed by the Government, the re-capitalization of businesses and the middle-class is important for sustained reconstruction and economic growth.

35. However, these basic packages will not be enough for building back better. Many actors, including the Government, are pushing for the development of a housing lending system that was microscopic before the quake, including for the middle-income categories, due to difficulties to set up effective guarantees. Fostering dynamic, efficient and accessible land markets is now a crucial issue, both in pre-existing settlements and in urban extension areas. To address the needs of larger groups rather than the tiny middle-income revenue categories, financial housing lending products will have to be developed with innovative cooperative approach to pooled risks and guarantees. Similarly, the public rental housing system which is under consideration by the Government and some international partners can only address the needs of the middle-income category as there is no effective legal and operational enforcement systems for rent payments in Haiti and maintenance costs would be unaffordable to poor people in the formal economic system. Supporting the rebuilding and development of the private rental housing stock, mainly owned by small investors at neighbourhood level (the middle-class of the slums) should be a priority but will require the development of community oversight mechanisms to improve living conditions of poor tenants.

36. The last urban challenge relates to the development of instruments to cope with spatial urban growth within the prevailing weak state environment. Chaotic, informal and horizontal urban expansion on rural and natural surrounding land, without urban infrastructure and services, is the standard pattern in all poor cities of the world. Recent land invasion witnessed in Port-au-Prince around Corail periurban camp, despite the signing of an executive order in March giving the Government the right to seize the land through eminent domain for developing industrial, services, and residential areas, shows the policy, legal, institutional and operational gaps to be filled to organize urban development and promote more compact cities. Proposing such instruments will be part of the urban strategic plan preparation launched in July but the implementation will need strong political willingness as it may affect the strategies of the owners of large periurban land.

**Recommendations to the IASC system on large urban disasters**

***Preparedness in cities at risk***

37. Many poor cities are potentially vulnerable to large natural disasters with additional risks in poor informal neighbourhoods constituting a large part of the urban fabric and accommodating large share of urban populations. Addressing vulnerabilities is a long-standing development issue as it mainly originates in the lack of appropriate urban and construction development and management that was prevailing for decades. While international development stakeholders should increasingly focus on supporting national and local governments and communities to reduce urban vulnerabilities, the IASC system should systematically encourage and support national and local governments to review and map the risks at all territorial levels through participatory approach that should include communities in neighbourhoods. Due to the central role of communities at large – including the informal and small private sector - and local governments, both in improving local situation and in responding to disasters, contingency plans should include a review of national, local and community actors’ capacities and develop capacity building programmes.

38. International dialogue and advocacy initiatives such as the ISDR World Disaster Reduction Campaign for “Making Cities Resilient” should be further enhanced and the IASC cluster system should be better linked to the UNDAF for ensuring progress in both vulnerability reduction and disaster preparedness. In many countries, UN Country Teams should be reinforced by specialized expertise to address complex urban contexts and promote the establishment of urban stakeholders’ platforms. This ‘urban expertise’ shall also be quickly dispatched within the apparatus of national and local governments in order to support authorities to efficiently and pertinently take good decisions in terms of assessment, coordination, policies and response strategies.

***Improving the situation analysis and the capacity to develop strategic vision and action plans***

39. Each disaster and each context is specific despite common patterns. Rapid situation analysis and assessments of damages and needs are crucial, either for maximizing immediate assistance, better estimating the needs or placing emergency action within the longer term perspective of the reconstruction of resilient cities. Assessing rapidly changing needs in urban context where people are rapidly displaced, as well as damages in case of flooding or quake replicas, require a flexible and integrated assessment system anchored at neighbourhood level and involving various stakeholders, including affected communities. The international community should rely much more on solid urban expertise instead of basing strategies on own opinions of decision-makers or the opinion of actors without urban expertise. Despite progress made in geo-referenced database systems, additional efforts should be made to improve flexibility (procedures and level of precision), timely responsiveness and incorporation of various sources of information, including from communities.

Understanding pre-disaster vulnerabilities and their causes, modalities of delivery of basic services, the mechanisms through which the communities are organised and governance gaps require urgent attention in shaping strategic responses.

***Review of the coordination system and tools***

40. Critical coordination issues to be reviewed for improving the response to large disasters in urban contexts include:

* Getting the right urban expertise to the Humanitarian Coordinator to shape the UN strategic response plan as early as possible after the disaster and engage in consensus-building with national and local authorities and other important international stakeholders.
* Improving inter-cluster capacities and links with the office of the HC.
* As all large disasters involve a multiplicity of issues and of actors, encouraging ad-hoc sub-cluster development and establish a small executive body in each cluster with the participation of key international partners and national and local stakeholders.
* Decentralize the cluster system at appropriate level to ensure the involvement of local stakeholders, including local authorities and community leaders.
* Streamline communication and information functions within the clusters at all levels.

41. The issue of over-reliance on a multiplicity of detailed guidelines drafted or reviewed after each major disaster applies to all steps, including preparedness, damage and need assessment and coordination. While necessary for various operational matters, over-reliance on guidelines amplifies the supply-driven approach versus context analysis and strategic vision development and limits the involvement of national and local stakeholders.

1. IASC report “Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inter-agency real time evaluation in Haiti : 3 months after the earthquake (RTE), Groupe URD and GPPi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Inter-agency real time evaluation in Haiti : 3 months after the earthquake (RTE), Groupe URD and GPPi [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ib. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ib. Key areas for improvement of the response: (…) weak humanitarian leadership and a lack of strategy, (…) the affected population was largely excluded from the design and implementation of the response due to biased assumption and attitudes, lack of knowledge about the context in the humanitarian community, insufficient coordination with national and local authorities (…) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ib. P 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Miami Herald, 13-09-2010: (…) hundreds arrived daily with no control, grabbing private land around the emergency relocation camp (…) Corail camp threatens to become a menacing slum. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interview to RFI/Le Monde 13 September 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)