

First published by the [Triple Crisis Blog](#)

February 8, 2010

Aiding Haiti: Let's get it right this time

Timothy A. Wise

Before I joined the [Global Development and Environment Institute](#) in 1999, I was the executive director at [Grassroots International](#), a Boston-based aid organization. With a focus on structural change and empowerment, Grassroots started an emergency program in Haiti after the first ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Later, we watched up close as the large US-funded aid effort, after Aristide's return in 1994, undermined Haitian government priorities, undercut food production, and weakened civil society institutions. The aid empowered foreign aid agencies and multinationals rather than Haiti's people. We documented the aid disaster with a report: "[Feeding Dependency, Starving Democracy.](#)"

Will history repeat itself in Haiti now? The outpouring of private aid, much of it from the pockets of people in the US, has been encouraging. But what should donors and agencies support if they want to avoid repeating history? Aid goes not to projects or services but first to service providers, to agencies themselves. And aid is power. Those who get more aid end up stronger than those who don't. When the crisis is over, who do we want to be stronger *as an institution*, and therefore better able to address or avert such crises in the future?

Here are a few guidelines I came up with:

- 1. Support agencies that build local capacities and institutions**– Some aid agencies, including most of the largest and best-known in the US, are “operational”, that is, they set up offices in-country and provide services themselves, often hiring large numbers of local residents to work for them. Operational agencies often weaken local institutions, drawing qualified staff out of relatively weak local organizations. Wherever possible, support agencies that work primarily through local partner institutions.
- 2. Support privately funded initiatives, not government contractors** – The US government is the largest aid provider in the US and it contracts much of that work out to US-based aid agencies. More than half the budgets of many of the largest US-based aid agencies come from the US government. So what? Well, first, private money is relatively less important to such efforts, which tend to be multimillion-dollar activities. Second, those agencies naturally tend to be accountable mainly to the US government, not to its private donors nor, more important, to the local communities they serve. Third, official US aid programs are among the most political in the world, often hewing to State Department objectives and guidelines first and humanitarian guidelines and needs second (or third or fourth).

3. Buy local and support regional economic development – Procurement is everything, a massive stimulus program. The question is, whose economy is it going to stimulate? USAID *brags* that 75% of all its aid comes back to the US – paying US consultants, buying US products, etc. As Ecuador’s [President Rafael Correa said when he visited Haiti](#): “There is a lot of imperialism among the donors. They donate first, but most of it goes back to them.” Government *and* private aid should stimulate the Haitian economy.

4. Agriculture matters – Sure, Haiti needs food aid right now. It also needs agricultural investment and protection for its farmers from the low prices caused by food aid and unregulated imports. In the 1990s, food aid poured in, trade liberalization opened the borders to subsidized US rice, and Haiti’s rice production fell dramatically.

5. Small is beautiful – The aid industry is dominated by the largest agencies, which compete for and win government contracts. The last things Haiti needs are aid agencies with more resources and power in-country than the government.

6. Rebuild government institutions – Private aid often comes with an anti-government bias. Haiti’s government has, quite literally, been reduced to rubble. Aid should prioritize efforts to build strong, responsive government institutions. [Early reports](#) showed precious little funding going to the Haitian government. Aid should also respond to Haitian government priorities, such as agricultural development. In the 1990s, less than 5% of US aid went to agriculture even though it was the government’s highest priority. In the meantime, creditors should [cancel Haiti’s \\$891 billion debt](#), not just restructure it.

Disasters often generate strong movements for social change, and the recovery effort itself is important not only economically but politically. This time, let’s not feed dependency and starve democracy.