

Learning from mistakes in Hurricane Matthew response in Haiti

 www.devex.com/news/88898



A scene from Les Cayes as Hurricane Matthew makes landfall in Haiti. Photo by: [Logan Abassi / U.N.](#)

There are no greater experts on Haiti's disaster recovery efforts than local communities, which have recently weathered an earthquake, several hurricanes and all the aftermath. Working with those communities will now be key as humanitarian and development professionals respond to Hurricane Matthew's devastation, experts told Devex.

Take the small rural community of Jeanette on the southern peninsula of Haiti, where some residents told aid groups they don't want tents but rather nails, hammers and tin so they could rebuild, according to Cathy Perrell, a consultant to organizations working in Haiti.

"In this disaster response, we're committed to changing our mindsets," she told Devex at [Opportunity Collaboration](#), an annual anti-poverty conference in Cancun, Mexico.

At a breakfast discussion Tuesday focused on Haiti, many attendees discussed how thinking and acting locally can help avoid the mistakes in the aid response following the 2010 earthquake. Here are some of the lessons learned, and how they could impact this latest relief effort.

1. Work with local organizations.

Even before the hurricane winds subsided, Google was already brimming with ads imploring people to "help Haiti now," some put up by organizations few in Haiti had ever heard of.

"This, quite frankly, pissed me off," Jim Chu, the founder of [dlo Haiti](#), a clean water organization, told Devex. He joined forces with others to start a Facebook group, [Effective Aid for Haiti After Hurricane Matthew](#), to direct support to organizations connected with communities and with resources already on the ground.

This is just one example of pushback against large organizations disconnected from local needs.

Other Haiti-based NGOs are urging contributions to community-focused groups. In an email request for emergency donations, Hugh Locke, president of the [Smallholder Farmers Alliance](#), outlined other organizations he could personally vouch for, from energy, microfinance, to health.

The diaspora is a strong resource for international aid groups, because many members want to get involved but are looking for a way to do so, said Nedgine Paul, founder and CEO of [Anseye Pou Ayiti](#), which is developing a network of teachers in the country.

2. Rethink capacity building.

Building up local partner organizations' capacity is a key mandate for international NGOs in Haiti, but it is rarely straightforward.

First, who defines capacity — outsiders or Haitians? Should international groups build on the capacity that already exists, adding what they can? What about the reverse: Haitians building the capacity of the international NGOs working with them?

"We've been struggling with the question of how to build capacity of our partners more strategically," said Gisela Keller, U.S. representative for the Swiss development assistance organization [HELVETAS](#), which she said is working with communities affected by the hurricane to transition from a state of emergency to a situation where they can build their own autonomy.

Answering these questions and others will be key in Haiti, as well as internationally where the push for localization is growing. An example is the [Charter for Change](#), which urges NGOs to channel 30 percent of all response funds through local organizations, with "accompanying capacity support," Muthoni Muriu, senior director of international programs at [Oxfam America](#), said Tuesday.



Samantha Hackney of the Haiti Development Institute kicks off a breakfast on the Hurricane Matthew response at Opportunity Collaboration in Cancun, Mexico. Photo by: Catherine Cheney / Devex

3. Go with money over goods.

The months and years after the 2010 earthquake were filled with story after story of handouts that hurt more than they helped. Food aid, for example, crashed local prices and undermined local farmers.

Even beyond the problem of [crop dumping](#), goods tend to be more expensive — and take longer to reach those in need — than money. Sourcing from the local economy can provide a boost to market when it is most in need, Conor Bohan, the founder of the Haitian Education and Leadership Program, told Devex.

Of course, money is not without pitfalls. Control and accountability are more complex, particularly when a country's institutions are already in crisis. But in this case, dollars are more likely to reach their intended recipients.

The hurricane, unlike the 2010 earthquake, left the capital Port-au-Prince relatively unscathed, with devastation focused in rural areas. The government can now play a central role in coordinating the response and recovery effort, Swan Fauveaud, country director of HELVETAS Haiti, told Devex via email.

“We must consider the coordination by the state as an essential condition, despite delays and inevitable constraints that implies,” he said. The failure to do so undermines the credibility of the interim government and hinders not only disaster response but long-term development, he said.

4. Stay for the long term.

Global development professionals working in Haiti say the problems following the earthquake were not in the immediate response but in the failure to transition effectively from humanitarian aid to sustainable development. This time, some NGOs are going in with a different approach.

“What does it look like to build really systemic and rooted solutions? That is what is needed and that is why we say we are looking inward to push forward,” Paul of Anseye Pou Ayiti said. “It gets overlooked because people are looking for the quick fix.”

As they make plans post-Matthew, professionals recalled the lessons of past relief efforts. “NGOs were giving water away for free without any sustainability plan many many month after the earthquake,” Chu told Devex. “It remains to be seen if that can be avoided.”

He urged several steps to ensure a longer-term response this time around: avoid top-down donor-driven decision-making, listen and be transparent with local communities, and rely on local expertise.

5. Consider the narrative.

Development leaders who traveled from Haiti to Cancun said a barrage of negative media coverage shaped the earthquake response and changed the narrative in the years following the hurricane.

By contrast, few readers and viewers heard about the solutions that took hold after the crisis. Organizations urged international actors to think about the impact of the story they tell.

“I worry a lot about the pity and how charity has become in some ways more harmful than good,” Paul told Devex. She credited Opportunity Collaboration with helping her to reframe her work in this sector as justice and service, as opposed to generosity, and she hopes others working on the response to the hurricane will think about and frame their work similarly.

“There is a disaster narrative about Haiti. We need to remember the narrative and be careful of what language we use post-Matthew.”

Read more [international development news](#) online, and [subscribe to The Development Newswire](#) to receive the latest from the world's leading donors and decision-makers — emailed to you FREE every business day.