



On the Edge: The Thin Line Between Global and Local

Dr. Mark B. Rosenberg

President, Florida International University

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Untold number of bones, bodies and buildings were crushed in the devastation of the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010. This natural disaster reminds us once again of the fine line between global and local. For anchor institutions in South Florida, such as Florida International University, it demands from us clarity about our missions and a sense of purpose and concern that extends far beyond our ascribed objectives.

The global/local line relating to Haiti is thin for us in South Florida. We are blessed with a very large Haitian-American community in the tri-county area around which our public university pivots. As a result, at FIU we have nearly 600 Haitian-American students and more than 100 faculty and staff with Haitian roots. Reflecting the post-earthquake mindset in our larger community, we are taking this tragedy personally at our university. We are all touched by the magnitude of what has happened, and grasping for a chance to help in the recovery.

Students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of our university all have seized the chance to assist in relief efforts, including making cash donations, coordinating collections of supplies, organizing a “Teach-in” with our faculty experts, putting together a medical relief team, helping Haitian immigrants with their applications for Temporary Protective Status (TPS), volunteering their language skills, and assisting our local government, Miami-Dade County, with the sorting and packing of donated goods. We also created a “Hope for Haiti” relief task force charged with coordinating our efforts. This has been an unprecedented opportunity for our university to show it is connected and engaged in our community, as well as our hemisphere, and has been an incredible hands-on global learning experience for our students.

I have just visited Port-au-Prince, Haiti to get a firsthand look at the devastation there and to understand, from the ground up, what really happened. From this visit and earlier post-earthquake programs that we have carried out, I have reached several conclusions that are worth sharing.

First, what happened in Haiti is not a disaster; it is a catastrophe of the highest order. Aside from the shocking loss of life - probably exceeding 200,000 – and the untold casualties, there is unparalleled dislocation and rupture. The country's already debilitated public infrastructure was completely destroyed in the capital city, where more than one third of the people lived. Key government buildings, including the National Palace, all came crashing down, killing many of the country's most able civil servants. The Catholic Church, a major source of stability in the country, was crippled beyond belief. The country's respected archbishop was a victim of the total physical collapse of the towering cathedral in the city-centre, and surrounding churches fared no better under the pressure of the countervailing horizontal fault lines.

Despite the intense world response to the calamity, the breadth of destruction coupled with the limited institutional capacity of the country, make prospects for a speedy recovery particularly challenging. I am not optimistic that any organizational or human capacity - national, non-national, governmental or non-governmental - can rebuild much in the next few years.

Under any scenario of recovery, time is the biggest enemy. Media interest is fickle. Attention spans are limited. Haiti has had these difficulties before. Despite massive responses in the past, not much has changed. So why will this time be different? As the catastrophe drops from the global consciousness and the front pages of newspapers and web pages, the pressure will grow on South Florida to provide a credible response. And of course, there is always migration to the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, or even South Florida, options that will present themselves as soon as the summer calms the ocean streams that flow toward Florida.

This brings us back to the question about what we should and can do to help in the recovery process. As a public institution of higher education avowing a commitment to local and global "engagement," we will certainly be tested in exactly what this commitment means in the context of Haiti. We can be deterred by the numerous obstacles to action, from state regulations that limit our range of activity off-shore, to limited ability to stretch resources even further given the state budget cutbacks.

In Haiti, there is a saying, "After the mountains, more mountains." However, as a consequence of my quick trip to the fractured country, and conversations with numerous surviving Haitians on the ground there, I am optimistic that recovery will occur and that our university will play an important role. For it was apparent to me during my visit that while bodies and buildings were mercilessly crushed during the earthquake, the Haitian spirit was not. And it is that spirit, ultimately, that must and will buoy global efforts to help the country get back on its feet.