

3rd Anniversary Earthquake Haiti

The earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 was an unprecedented urban crisis, highlighting chronic vulnerabilities in the city and setting back its development. Over the last three years, we have witnessed the remarkable resolve of the Haitian people to rebuild their previous homes or create new housing solutions and to re-establish their livelihoods.

We must continue to evaluate the impact of our response so far and find better ways of addressing the remaining challenges. As the earthquake in Haiti was the biggest urban disaster of the last decades, we should not hesitate to push the global reflection on how to respond better to an urban crisis, re-thinking the humanitarian response, and how to make cities more resilient.

After the emergency, we should now focus again on addressing underlying and enduring urban issues like access to services, uncontrolled urban development in hazardous areas, low construction quality and insufficient housing supply.

We need to support more inclusive and planned growth of cities, as vital for the development of the Haitian economy, and Haitian society. This is as much about rehabilitating and upgrading existing neighbourhoods and regenerating historic city centres as planning new growth areas. We need to ensure progress is equitable and that development gains secured are not eroded.

We are reminded by the experience of Hurricane Sandy late last year that Haiti is exposed to multiple hazards and experiences frequent small and large disasters. These crises cause a particularly severe impact when they strike urban areas, where losses are higher; displacement is complex and reconstruction difficult and expensive. Those in poor quality housing and marginal locations suffer most. Urban disasters can cripple governments and economies.

Experience in many countries, with some encouraging signs in Haiti, shows that strengthening urban resilience is an investment that pays dividends. This requires a sustained effort to understand the complexity of urban systems and dynamics and to advance across a range of inter related aspects, investing in more resilient infrastructure, in improved construction skills and in empowered communities and city authorities.

In Haiti, over 500,000 new homes are needed over the next 10 years to replace disaster losses and to meet the needs of population growth. The number of houses the state and the international community could provide directly is only a fraction of what is needed. In reality, most housing in Haiti is constructed through the informal private sector, where the quality of materials and construction skill are extremely low resulting in risky building practices.

A few quality projects by the state or by the international community may address pressure to show concrete results, but may make little impact in terms of the numbers required and may not be replicable. Strategic measures are required in the housing sector to go to scale: reforms in housing finance, land and tenure, planning and construction regulatory systems.

The informal sector poses serious questions about quality. However, it can also be seen as an immense potential that can be harnessed positively to enable people to build their own homes better. It also ensures a more diverse housing market with more private sector rental options, so badly needed for low income urban families.

As we move forward to a new phase with more limited assistance funding, we need to do more with less. We must invest wisely in measures that will have wide and long term impacts. We must invest strategically to guide, condition and leverage the wider resources and capacities available to achieve maximum results.

While Haiti, like its Caribbean neighbours, is exposed to risks of natural disaster, it is on the other hand also very fortunate in terms of its benevolent climate with plentiful rain that many others can only envy. Originally richly forested, Haiti has suffered from extensive environmental degradation over several decades.

Environmental regeneration and natural resource management are high on the agenda. This is a welcome prioritisation, and can complement and support urban resilience activities. Improved environmental management, combined with improved energy policies, can contribute greatly to disaster risk management, reducing flooding and landslides, in both rural and urban areas. The environmental agenda has to be seen as integral to urban development. Let's not be short-sighted. The urban population will double in less than 20 years, straining available resources and water and land in particular. We need to plan better, and act today with that time horizon in mind.

A greener city could be a healthier city, a safer city, a more productive city, and more resilient city.