

Hungry to Learn
By Asha-Rose Migiro

Mine is the rare job that allows me to meet, within the span of a very few hours, both a president and a homeless mother. And each told me the same thing.

Three months after the earthquake that devastated Haiti, President Préval welcomed me to his offices in Port au Prince -- a modest building in the gardens behind his ruined presidential palace. Education, he said straight-off, must be a corner stone of the international effort to rebuild Haiti. Without that, there is no future.

Not long after, I visited a tent-city crowded with thousands of displaced families. A slender mother pushed her bright-eyed child toward me, no more than eight years old. "He wants to learn," she told me with calm insistence. "Give him the chance."

Two people, occupying very different positions in life. Yet each delivered a message that I heard again and again during my two-day stay. Haitians want and need our help. But when it comes to the work of rebuilding Haiti, they want to do it for themselves. And that work begins with school.

Schooling is the ticket to decent work, all the more so in a country like Haiti where unemployment is high and jobs are scarce. But there is also a more immediate reality. In the aftermath of disaster, school does more than promote learning. It gives children a sense of normalcy amid the chaos. It is a place of security and sanctuary. Above all, it offers hope for the future.

When people live in near-desperation -- lacking food, medicine, shelter -- such things matter more than ever. That is why the United Nations mission in Haiti, working closely with the government and international aid organizations, has worked to re-open schools as quickly as possible. Mothers and children are particularly vulnerable. After spending an afternoon in one camp, and joining a night patrol later that evening, I knew their fears and frustrations. When it rains, the ground turns to mud. Their tents collapse; they have no dry place to sleep. And of course, in the dark corners there is often violence and rape.

The United Nations has made progress in dealing with all these problems. My chief reason in going to Haiti was to update myself on the situation and our response. But as our attentions turn from the immediate crisis to longer-term recovery, I came away with a clear sense of what is required above all else: self-reliance. Again, the ordinary Haitians I met put it best. "No handouts," a group of unemployed youths in Leogane, the epicenter of the earthquake, shouted venting their frustration as I visited their camp. Their families had lost most of their possessions, but their pride was intact. "Give us schools. Then we'll take care of the rest."

It is a daunting challenge. Even before the earthquake, Haiti's illiteracy rates were among the highest in the hemisphere, and enrolment rates among the lowest. Two adults out of every five could not read and less than half of primary school-age children attended classes. The figures for high school were even worse: less than 2 percent of children are graduates.

Haiti's government has little control over this situation. The vast majority of the country's schools are privately owned; only 10 to 15 percent are owned by the state, which cannot properly set or monitor standards. Ultimately, Haiti can flourish only to the extent that we nourish its people -- and for all their difficulties, no one knows this better than Haitians.

I well understand their feelings. In my native Tanzania, our founding president was known by the highest title we could bestow: "Teacher." President Julius "Mwalimu" Nyerere's first principle of self-reliance was grounded on education, for girls as well as boys -- a legacy of gender equality that paved the way for my own career.

At last month's donor's conference in New York, the international community raised nearly \$10 billion for Haiti. That enormous sum is designed to help finance the wholesale "reinvention" of the country -- to "build back better," in the phrase used by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. And education is instrumental.

Working with the Haitian government and other partners, the United Nations is planning a nationwide movement for learning. The goal: to promote the enrolment of all Haiti's children and adolescents in school. Haiti needs our solidarity. That means many things: building materials, health clinics and medicine, sanitation systems, food and fuel. But it also means things beyond the immediate—the stuff of future life.

Books, teachers and education must be among them, as President Préval and many mothers said clearly. Ultimately, they are the keys to a better life and a better future. Haiti's wonderful and resourceful people deserve no less.

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