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# The continuing social and environmental tragedy of Haiti

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A woman is helped from the rubble. Source: Financial Times.com.

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The tragic loss of lives in the earthquake that devastated Haiti's capital city of Port-au-Prince last 12 January also magnified the island country's tragic social and institutional inability to cope and help itself.

Residents pass by collapsed buildings - only a cross remains standing. Source: Daily Mail Co. UK

Haiti's historical vulnerability and weak institutions that never fully responded to the needs of its nine million people compound the 7.0 magnitude earthquake, massive as it is. World attention, relief and humanitarian efforts are now focused on Haiti. The search for survivors amongst the rubble of buildings and its shanty areas continues.

The dead are being buried in mass graves and many still remain to be buried. For those who survived, the scarcity of food and water has provoked food riots and looting. There is no functioning police and national army that can ensure even a semblance of order, and it is the international community taking responsibility for these State functions. The economy is not functioning, but its economy is already largely isolated even before the earthquake. Communications, roads, hospitals, and other critical infrastructure were also destroyed and need to be re-built with enforced building codes and standards in place this time.

In 2008, nearly 800 Haitians died after four tropical storms battered the country, one after the other in a span of 30 days, ending with Hurricane Ike in September. Sixty percent of the country's harvest was destroyed, and the United Nations requested US\$108m from international agencies. In 2004, tropical storm Jeanne took an estimated 3,000 Haitian lives. This prompted then Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis to state that at the rate Haitians are dying as a result of ecological disasters, Haiti may "disappear one day."

A resident stands next to dead bodies at the general hospital after the earthquake hit Port-au-Prince. Source: Financial Times.com

Notwithstanding the impact of ecological disasters, Haiti has long suffered from the impact of social disasters, since winning the slave revolt of 1804. Little support was generated since then, and this deeply troubled country suffered and agonized with its dictatorships, ignorance, illiteracy, violence, and generally snubbed by its neighbors and most countries. The investment in its people and the skills development beyond a largely farming population were neglected. Democratic elections attempted to restore a peaceful transfer of power, but the government installed really never got off the ground and its buildings and the presidential palace pancaked last week.

The latest human development index for Haiti ranks the country 149th out of 182 countries, while its human poverty index stands at 97th among 135, and around 700,000 of its population migrate annually, more than half to Northern America. GDP per capita is US\$3 per day. The country survives on imports, international donations, and remittances from its migrants.

Life expectancy in Haiti is at 61 years, with 1.6 million probably not surviving beyond 40 years (health deprivation). There are around 3.4 million illiterate adults from 15 years and above (education deprivation). Almost four million do not use an improved water source, and almost two million children under five years old are underweight for their age.

A woman holds a rosary while looking at the bodies of earthquake victim. Source: Financial Times.com

These are staggering social disasters that the international community needs to seriously focus on when the earthquake crisis is over, when the dead are buried, when the buildings and other infrastructure are restored and rebuilt. While the forces of nature will continue to batter Haiti, the world must ensure that the help is continued for Haiti and its people who were already miserable, dying, hungry, and without shelter even before 12 January.

The pain and agony in Haiti, a country at the other end of the world, do well to remind us in the Philippines of our own pain and agony when natural events take their course in our landscape. Haiti also reminds us of the importance of strong and functioning institutions, a responsible, caring, and accountable society, and the need to continuously develop and invest in strengthening people's capacities and skills.