

Haiti's many challenges reveal the difficulties of humanitarian work

Tuesday, February 9, 2010

In a perfect world, distributions of humanitarian aid after a major disaster would occur without a hitch. Everything would be orderly, and proceed with due precision.

By Chris Herlinger/CWS

Port-au-Prince, Haiti - In a perfect world, distributions of humanitarian aid after a major disaster would occur without a hitch. Everything would be orderly, and proceed with due precision.

But life is messy and Haiti is far from a perfect place. Humanitarian practice, even during relatively small emergencies, is hard and imperfect work - a fact often not fully understood or appreciated by donors and even non-emergency staff members of humanitarian groups.

When compounded by the many challenges posed in Haiti - bad infrastructure even before the quake, the massive scale of damage, the toll the quake has taken on everyone - some acceptance of imperfection and the need to improvise become part of the daily realities of aid workers.

"You need to be patient to do this kind of work," said Emmanuela Blain, 30, a medical doctor who is helping coordinate ACT/Lutheran World Relief's distribution of food and non-food items in and outside of Port-au-Prince.

Patience is certainly needed now, nearly a month after the devastating 12 January earthquake and at a time when "coordination and distribution remain difficult, overall public interest in Haiti may be waning but needs will remain for months to come," said Dirk Salomons, the director of the humanitarian affairs program at Columbia University in New York City.

Blain knows something about the need for patience. A recent distribution in Gressier, located some 20 kilometers west of Port-au-Prince, got out of control when local police demanding tents refused to do much to calm a crowd.

During the 30 January incident, Blain and the other ACT/LWF staffers did their best to maintain order and continue the distribution and their stated goal of assisting the most vulnerable, including families with pregnant women and young children. Eventually the crowd got unruly, a policewoman fired two shots in the air and the distribution ended. The young ACT/LWF staff were disappointed and frustrated.

By contrast, a distribution a day earlier elsewhere had gone perfectly, Blain said, while another the next day at the Santa Teresa camp in Port-au-Prince also went off without problems.



People moving buckets of food and other emergency supplies into the Santa Teresa camp in Petionville, Haiti, where hundreds of families left homeless by the earthquake are living. Supplies were provided by Lutheran World Federation, Church World Service, and the World Food Program.

Photo: Paul Jeffrey/ACT Alliance

Why the differences? One was that unlike those in Santa Teresa, Gressier residents had not received any assistance up until then - they were simply tired and angry. Another was the presence in Santa Teresa of a police officer who calmly urged the crowd to be patient and said he would personally stop the distribution if problems began.

The officer, Harry Brossard, said the tactic seemed to work, and it stemmed from his own desire to see food distributed to those who needed it. "We need food for these people," he said.

The crowd in Santa Teresa also seemed to be more patient and understanding than the crowd in Gressier about the need for distributions to target the most vulnerable. "I think they have to think about the other people (eventually)," said Willy Louis, a security guard. "But it's no problem for me. Pregnant people and the disabled should come first."

Marie Dany F. Volter, 34, who like Blain and the overwhelming majority of aid workers here is Haitian, said first-time distributions like that in Gressier "are never easy." That is particularly the case in a situation where aid is urgently needed and it may not be easy to work out all details in advance with the local partner.

Bobby Waddell, senior advisor on emergencies for ACT/LWF who is working with Blain and Volter in the Haiti emergency operation, noted there are any number of things that can go wrong in major humanitarian crisis. These can include bottlenecks in the aid "pipeline;" coordination problems; and a feeling that more staff are needed to do the job.

Salomons notes other potential problems: "There are initial information gaps, as not only the physical infrastructure breaks down, but also communication systems like cell-towers and landlines," he said. "So chaos ensues."

And then, in Haiti, there are the difficult pre-existing realities.

"It's a special place, a special country, it has its own context, it's chaotic in normal times, and it's a challenging place to work," Waddell said.

Those realities exacerbated what became a unique, catastrophic event - "a direct hit on a capital city which then paralyzed an entire country," he said.

The trick, Waddell added, is maneuvering around all the challenges while still being accountable to donors and, most importantly, those needing the assistance.

The job is not going to get any easier. In the end, he said, most everyone affected by the quake is vulnerable in some way, and in coming months, Haiti faces a rainy season and the threat of storms, floods and hurricanes. "How do we prepare for that?" Waddell asked.

In other words, the challenges in Haiti are just beginning.

Chris Herlinger is reporting from Haiti on behalf of the ACT Alliance, of which CWS is a member.

actalliance