



Haiti on a long road to recovery

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I remember my ride in from New Orleans airport on January 7, 2007. It was late evening and I was going to my new apartment on Jackson Street in the central city area to take on my new job as Recovery Director for the City of New Orleans. I arrived at the building and felt not the chill in the air but the eerie chill of total silence. It took until the next morning to realise what was so different. There were "no birds".

New Orleans has come a long way since that day, a bit over two years ago. No New Orleanians like the pace of recovery after Hurricane Katrina. That is a given. But New Orleans, like Haiti, had many problems well before Katrina struck. Haiti and New Orleans have some remarkable similarities. Both places are poor. Both places had years of failing infrastructure, from poor roads to water and sewer systems, that failed long before the crippling

natural disasters. So, recovery is not getting back to where you were before the catastrophes. Recovery is totally re-thinking the entire economic, social and physical structure of the community.

Few communities have actually recovered as fast as New Orleans is recovering; this remarkable speed is certainly a testament to the hard work of citizens and many volunteers. New Orleans citizens are showing how determined they are, with over 72 percent already returned to live. The city of New Orleans alone suffered \$US20 billion (SAUD22.15 billion) in direct damage to its infrastructure. No matter what dimension one looks at, you can find a remarkable story. Public infrastructure is over 90 percent in place.

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Most public safety facilities are working at full capacity, even though three new fire houses out of 20, and two police stations out of seven, have to be rebuilt. Parks and playgrounds are open in all areas of the city already serving youth and adults. New libraries are being designed and scheduled for opening within 24 months. The city is paving more streets in the current year than at any time in its history. All of the major convention, sports and visitor destinations are not only open but hosting national events, including a Super Bowl for 2013.

There is little doubt that the lag in federal funding and disputes over what was damaged by the storm and what was already in poor repair pre-Katrina exasperated everyone. Nonetheless, the recovery plan is being carried out on time and at a remarkable pace.

Recoveries from disasters are not fast anywhere. San Francisco and Oakland, which suffered less damage than New Orleans, took more than a decade to recover.

Comparably damaged cities like Kobe, Japan, have taken 15-plus years to recover and many other cities even longer. But the inconvenient truth is that any city hampered by poor preparation and poor internal governance will take many years to reach a state of good repair and stronger institutions.

Port Au Prince is a classic case of lack of preparation and weak internal institutions. Before it can recover, a new approach to a government and social order that can survive has to be developed. Certainly international organizations can help but the goal is to help Haiti help itself.

Even with this approach we have to be realistic. The best we can expect is five years to reach stabilization and 20 to complete the process of building a city. San Francisco took 40 months with a well-agreed-upon recovery plan.

In essence, while Port Au Prince will improve like New Orleans, New Orleans and Port Au Prince will wear the scars of recovery for many years. The real issue is not

building faster but building better and smarter. The primary threats to Haiti and its region will come from rising and warming seas, increasing the number and strength of hurricanes in the next decades. So, Haiti and the entire Caribbean has to gear up for new disasters of similar magnitude. Sound preparation, such as re-organising power systems, hardening water infrastructure and re-enforcing all schools as shelters, should be undertaken now.

We in Australia have many building, solar and other technologies, and sustainable temporary housing systems, that can make a difference in recovery for Haiti, the Caribbean and our own neighboring Pacific nations. Let's offer aid to rebuild better places now, and not wait for disasters. Let's be in a hurry to do it right.

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