



GROND ZONDER RUST

BREUKLIJNEN IN HAITIAANSE BODEM

LAND WITHOUT REST – FAULT LINES IN HAITIAN SOIL

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INTRODUCTION: HAITI'S VULNERABILITY

Natural disasters are not simply 'acts of God' or 'acts of nature', natural threats that suddenly hit us from the outside. Mostly they are phenomena that arise in interaction with our own society. In the autumn of 2014, professor Georg Frerks drew this conclusion in his goodbye speech as full professor of disaster studies at Wageningen University.

In his speech 'Disasters in everyday life, the everyday life of disasters', Frerks shows that natural disasters are not mere incidents, but everyday phenomena affecting a considerable part of the world's population. The professor believes that the workings of nature are not the one and only cause responsible for the many disasters and the scope of the damage that results. It is his conviction that disasters "are the result of misguided (government) decisions and interventions in nature. Many people are victims of faulty decisions about the location of settlements, careless attitudes towards rules and regulations, corruption and misuse of natural resources." Frerks emphasises that the nature and impact of natural disasters are best understood from the perspective of the vulnerability of societies in which these disasters take place. This vulnerability is not a natural phenomenon, but is composed of political, economic and social factors. This way, disasters are no longer viewed as purely external, natural threats, but also – and possibly even mainly – as the result of processes such as social development and human intervention in nature.

Haiti Earthquake

On 12 January 2010, just before five o'clock in the afternoon, Haiti was hit by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. The epicentre was located somewhere to the south-west of the capital city of Port-au-Prince. The outburst of the forces of nature lasted 35 seconds and was followed by many aftershocks. The results were disastrous. Thousands of Haitians were dragged along with their tiny dwellings that were swept away from the steep and eroded slopes, or crushed between the unreliable concrete of hundreds of buildings that collapsed as card houses within a few seconds. More than 200,000 people suddenly met their death. Hundreds of thousands got injured and 1.5 million people were left homeless. Many left the cities to find shelter with relatives in the country, or ended up in hundreds of improvised tent camps. The material damage was huge. Most of the city of Léogâne turned into debris; Port-au-Prince and the southern part of the coastal town of Jacmel were heavily hit.

Soon it became clear what geological explanation could be given for the *goudougoudou*, as the Haitians onomatopoeically called the earthquake. On 20 January 2010, the Dutch meteorological institute KNMI wrote on its website "The Haiti earthquake is a result of the plate tectonics in the Caribbean. Haiti is located on a fault line that forms the northern border between the Caribbean plate and the North American plate. At this fault line, these two plates shift past each other at a speed of about 20 mm a year. This caused the movement of the earthquake to be an oblique-slip. The area around Haiti is a seismically active area, often causing earthquakes, but mostly of a smaller scale than this one. The most recent great earthquake along the same fault line, the *Enriquillo-Plaintain Garden* fault, was 150 years ago in 1860."

To explain the devastating consequences of the earthquake, the meteorological service wrote, "The earthquake caused a lot of victims and damage. It was a heavy, shallow earthquake. 10 km below the surface is very shallow for a heavy earthquake, and it caused many and larger shocks on the surface. The fact that it occurred closely to Haiti's capital city is an additional factor causing a lot of destruction." This statement combines the magnitude of the earthquake, the fact that it occurred relatively close to the surface of the earth and the close proximity of a large city to form the most prominent causes for the devastating impact of the earthquake. In 2013, Steven van Benthem published additional data in his PhD-dissertation at Utrecht University. He discovered an edge along and faults inside the Atlantic plate that had not been detected before. According to his research, these form an important geological explanation for the earthquake. This scientific discovery contributed to a sufficiently documented natural cause for the *goudougoudou*.

Man-made disaster

Not only had it become clear what caused this 'act of nature', but everyone also understood that a shallow and heavy earthquake in the vicinity of a large city was liable to cause a lot of damage. The geology and the geography of the earthquake had been sufficiently dealt with. Nonetheless, we may wonder – in line with disaster professor Frerks' remarks – whether this is all that we have to say about the *goudougoudou*. Perhaps we should not only try to understand the disaster as an 'act of nature', but also relate it to human activity or the lack of it; to bad policy and corruption, to overpopulation of a bulging city; to a complete absence of city planning, causing houses to be built on steep slopes and in ravines; to the lack of maintaining rules and regulations? Frerks would say that the impact of the Haiti earthquake is best understood from the perspective of mutual influence of the geology and the vulnerability of Haitian society. This way, we take into account both the geological fault lines running deeply below the Haitians' feet and the various historically formed social fault lines running across all of society, prominently determining its vulnerability.

This is also pointed out by Paul Farmer in his book *Haiti after the earthquake*. For many decades, Farmer has worked as a medical doctor in Haiti and other developing countries. He describes the earthquake and its consequences using a medical metaphor. He qualifies the situation as an 'acute-on-chronic' problem. He compares Haiti with a chronically ill person and an extremely vulnerable patient that on top of that is also struck by an acute ailment, that among other causes arises from the chronic illness. As a medical doctor Farmer says that in such cases, the acute ailment should be treated, but at the same time the chronic problem will also have to be tackled. For Haiti this means that those who wish to really understand the consequences of the earthquake also need to penetrate the chronic problems of the country. And that those who want to work on restoration should not only tackle the immediate material and immaterial damage of the earthquake, but also combat the underlying problems. Farmer's words echo Frerks' goodbye speech, when he writes, "... how 'natural' a disaster was the one that struck Haiti on January 12? What made Haiti peculiarly vulnerable to the quake...How much of this vulnerability was social, rather than natural and caused by bad policies, foreign and homegrown? (2011, p. 117).

Haitian scientist Patrick Bellegarde Smith (2011) even describes the earthquake as a 'man-made disaster'. Another Haitian, the political scientist and economist Jean-Germain Gros (2011), analyses the Haitian tragedy as the result of a meeting of nature's fury with a state's weakness and foreign actors' interference. In his view, the miserable geography (its location in an earthquake sensitive area with many hurricanes) and the weakness of its social institutions are responsible for the unspeakable suffering of the Haitian people. Gros writes, "Goudougoudo was triggered by Nature, but the scale of the destruction was due to the massive failure of Haitian social institutions, namely the state, and

international policy...The precariousness of Haitian life cannot be attributed to bad geography alone: it is also due to how the risks imposed by geography are managed by Haitian institutions and international actors that have been active on the Haitian scene for decades, if not centuries”(pp. 133-135). Gros thus underlines the vulnerability of Haitian society and points at both the activities of his own government and those of international actors (countries and (financial) institutions) as the main cause for this vulnerability.

Disastrous choices

In November 2008 Haitian economist Myrtha Gilbert published an article on the site of news agency *Alterpresse* under the title “The disaster was not natural”. That same year, just as in 2007, Haiti was heavily struck by hurricanes and tropical storms. Hundreds of people died, animals were dragged along by the water and material damage to houses, roads and harvest was enormous. This violence of nature recalled memories of 2004, when cyclone Jeanne caused the coastal city of Gonaïves to be flooded. The result: 3,000 deaths, 2600 wounded and 300,000 homeless. It was not as if it had rained so much in Gonaïves itself, the driest city in the country. The rain had fallen further inland on bare, heavily eroded mountain slopes. From the slopes the water had been pushed via the dried-out and sandy riverbeds to the coastal plains. Clogged-up drainage canals were not much help and the lowly situated Gonaïves was flooded. Just briefly before, the southern mountain village of Verrettes had been all but erased from the map. We could go on and on further back into history: to gale Gordon in 1994 or to hurricane Hazel in 1954.

According to Gilbert, the heavy impact of the continual violence of nature is to be blamed on human interference in nature. She maintains that the ecological disasters are the result of, amongst other things, massive deforestation, knowingly facilitated or condoned by the government in the interest of foreign countries and its own national elites. “The uncovering of Haitian soil has been caused by disastrous choices”, she writes. And these choices made Haiti vulnerable to natural risks.

Haiti’s vulnerability

In his book *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti* anthropologist Mark Schuller writes that the earthquake of 12 January 2010 tells the exact same story as that of earlier hurricanes and tropical storms. He wondered how Haiti’s vulnerability first emerged. To answer this question, he uses the *Disaster Pressure and Release*-model. Within this model, disasters are viewed as a coming together of sociological factors and the occurrence of a physical disaster with its own characteristics, such as the nature of the disaster (e.g. an earthquake), its intensity (magnitude, depth of the quake), and proximity of densely populated areas. The model distinguishes three aspects on the sociological side:

basic causes, dynamic tensions and unsafe circumstances. These three aspects together determine the extent to which a society is vulnerable to natural violence.

Fundamental causes are related to historically developed political and economic systems and structures determining how a society divides power and prosperity. Dynamic tensions deal with social developments rising from the political and economic system concerned. Unsafe circumstances are concrete situations making life unsafe for citizens and leading, for instance, to a high number of casualties after a disaster. For Haiti, these are, among other things, the use of bad quality construction material to keep construction work cheap; a lack of well-trained construction workers and professional equipment; not obeying nor maintaining construction rules and regulations; constructing houses in dangerous places, such as steep slopes and ravines; the absence of rescue teams and sufficient medical care. These unsafe circumstances arise from dynamic tensions in society. In Haiti deforestation and social and economic negligence of the countryside have led to massive migration to the capital city of Port-au-Prince, where people ended up in overpopulated neighbourhoods and slums. The government did not provide an architecturally good infrastructure and did not invest sufficiently in facilities such as drinking water supplies, medical care, education and electricity. Government policy even stimulated migration into the city in order to create (badly paid) jobs in the assembly industry on the outskirts of the city, while arable land was used for the production of export products. Meanwhile, the national rice production – and therefore a prominent part of the national food production – was sacrificed to the import of cheaper rice. These developments (dynamic tensions) created a condition for unsafe circumstances. In their turn, dynamic tensions can be traced back to a number of basic causes. Schuller names three basic causes for Haiti's vulnerability: the colonial past characterised by slavery and economic exploitation; Haiti's continual dependence on and ties to the politics of foreign nations; and a failing (and on and off dictatorial) government serving its own interests and those of the elite, and disregarding the people's well-being. Schuller summarizes the results of these basic causes as follows, "The legacy of this foreign powers-state-elite "ménage à trois" [...] is environmental destruction, land conflicts, social exclusion, extreme inequality, centralization in Port-au-Prince, and a state that did not invest in social development, all of which amplified the destructive force of natural hazards, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, both of which are endemic to the region"(2016, p.27).

Negative image

In *Haiti's Bad Press*, cultural anthropologist Robert Lawless paints an embarrassing picture of how foreigners have looked upon Haiti and the Haitians over the centuries. The Western view of Haiti is dominated by racist opinions, Western feelings of superiority, stigmatizing and belittling of Haitian society, and vodou. Characteristic for this is the almost automatic qualification in the media of Haiti as 'the poorest country in the Western hemisphere'. As if it is Haiti's last name.

Various authors discuss Haiti's image in the book *The Idea of Haïti. Rethinking Crisis and Development*. They wonder who tell which stories about Haiti and why. They conclude that Haiti is mainly portrayed as a country that is 'in a never ending crisis'; "a progress-resistant, deviant and childlike nation unaware of the material and ideological benefits of democracy and capitalism" (p. xiii); a country that deviates from other countries in all aspects and that is, therefore, incomprehensible and unexplainable.

The editor, Millery Polyné, writes in his introductory article that many stories are told by national and international governments and elites, by media and aid organisations. These often one-sided stories hide a diversity of interests. Many stories about Haiti completely lack the perspective of the majority of the people: those who live in the countryside and the slums. There are but few factual analyses about the role that the crooked international and also national power relations played in the emergence of Haiti's underdevelopment. Haiti is simply described as anti-modern, violent, chaotic, as "an embodiment of alterity – exceptionally chaotic and incomprehensible" (p. xviii). A story often heard in religious circles is that Haiti's misfortune is related to the alleged historic data that in 1791, prior to the great slave revolt against French colonial domination, the country was sold to the devil. The rebellious slaves would have closed a pact with the devil to beat the French. This religious way of reasoning, thus lays the blame for Haiti's underdevelopment with the Haitians themselves and their religion. The image of a curse resting on Haiti, is also used in a wider context. Only a day after the earthquake, the French newspaper *Libération* showed the following heading in big black letters, with in the background a picture of a young woman emerging from the debris: *TERRE MAUDITE (CURSED LAND)*. Journalist and media expert Stéphanie Barzasi investigated in what way the French newspapers reported on the disaster after the earthquake. She published her findings in *Haïti, l'Histoire en Héritage (Haiti, History and Heritage)*. She concluded that the three newspapers she had investigated (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*) made ample use of religious imagery, varying from 'descending into hell', 'misfortune island', 'hideous brutality of fate', 'Haiti, martyr', to 'Haiti: the curse'. Barzasi says, "This religious semantics evoking the idea of punishment or abandonment is not innocent. It evokes the thought of a faux pas reminiscent of the way in which former colonists discredited the new state by saying that the Haitian victory of independence could only have come

about thanks to an occult covenant”(p. 137). On January 14, *Le Figaro* reports on Haiti as “an island adrift, fatigued by fate...for years, Haiti has been a country sunk in an economic, social and moral disaster”(p.147). Barzasi claims that news reporting in both word and image has adopted historically formed stereotypes and prejudices about Haiti and the Haitians.

Structure of the book

Therefore, those who wish to understand why the earthquake (and other forms of nature’s violence) has had so much impact should not merely study its geology and geography, but also map out all kinds of social fault lines: the basic causes and the dynamic tensions that have made the country vulnerable and created unsafe situations. Just as geological fault lines, these social fault lines do not emerge overnight. They are results of processes that may span decades or even centuries.

In this book I go back into the fascinating history of Haiti to uncover these fault lines. I have set out to sketch the development of a nation that, according to many statistics about human development and well-being, is the complete opposite of my own country, the Netherlands, and yet it does not belong to a different world. Haitians are part of the same humanity as the Dutch.

The book follows both an historic line and a thematic line. The ten chapters trace Haiti’s history step by step. With this historic line in the background, the thematic line takes shape. It concentrates on the question of how Haiti has become so vulnerable. It is precisely this vulnerability that is an important factor to, on the one hand, understand the devastating extent of the material and immaterial damage suffered from the 2010 earthquake and, on the other hand, to realise that the reconstruction of Haiti is not a matter of simple slogans like ‘Build back better’ and donating a lot of money. The thematic line is clearly visible in a thematic chapter that closes each of the three historic parts.

Part 1: Before and during colonial times

This book considers the colonial domination as the fundamentally basic cause for the emergence of Haiti’s vulnerability. Hundreds of thousands of people from Africa were imported and put to work as slaves under deplorable circumstances. This period of exploitation ended because of a long-lasting and eventually successful revolt of the slaves. The first part of this book – chapters 1 to 4 – discusses this crucial phase in Haiti’s history. During those times, the basic pattern of Haiti’s society was laid out. This first part concludes with a description of the colonial heritage that Haiti received – or perhaps more appropriately, the colonial burden that Haiti inherited – at its birth in 1804.

Part 2: Haiti as an independent nation

Part two consists of five chapters that discuss Haiti's history from the moment that it appeared as an independent state at the world's stage in 1804 until the earthquake on 12 January 2010. This second part shows the emergence of three interdependent fault lines arising from the colonial heritage and causing Haiti's vulnerability. These are:

1) The political fault line

The *political fault line* becomes visible in the relation between state (the government) and society (the people). A predatory government positions itself in opposition to society by authoritarian governance and the use of violence, corruption and military power. It also fails in its facilitating task towards its citizens of providing social services (such as education, health care and infrastructure), offering security (constitutional state) and social security (employment), and the protection of the natural environment.

2) The international fault line

The *international fault line* indicates that for centuries, Haiti has been a toy of foreign superpowers at the world's stage. The international community isolated Haiti when it was a young nation and treated it as a pariah state. Thus, Haiti has ended up on the outer edge of the world's society, as a result of a forced on and unjustified burden of debts, a twenty-year American occupation, a neo-colonial and neo-liberal international policy and an international interference that continues to this day.

3) The socio-cultural fault line

The *socio-cultural fault line* deals with cultural patterns that have developed throughout the course of history. Haiti's vulnerability is maintained by an historically developed *marronage* mentality (a *marron* was a slave that had fled from the plantation) and a culture of distrust. Both of these stem from colonial times and have further developed in a context of great social inequality and international inferiority.

Part 3: After the earthquake

The final chapter follows Haiti's development since the earthquake until the beginning of 2019. How did it go with the restoration of the country and what role did the international community play? After ten years, are we able to say that things have really changed for the better for the Haitians? Has the earthquake inspired a movement that will actually combat the fundamental causes of Haiti's vulnerability?

Translation from Dutch by Marga van Gent (www.margeli.nl).