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In Haiti, aid agencies focus on developing skills

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Jan. 12, 2011

WASHINGTON -- As recovery efforts slowly move forward a year after a massive earthquake leveled Haiti's most densely populated communities, aid and development agencies have begun focusing on building the skills of Haitians to better address the numerous challenges facing the impoverished nation.

Such efforts are taking advantage of the resiliency, determination and entrepreneurial spirit of Haitians, who have been forced to deal with oppressive or unresponsive governments and the remnants of colonial rule for generations.

Aid and development workers call the effort "capacity building." Representatives of Catholic Relief Services, the U.N. Office of the Special Envoy to Haiti and the U.S. Agency for International Development told a gathering to mark the one-year anniversary of the earthquake Jan. 11 that no matter how much aid they provide, the sooner Haitians develop the ability to deal with the country's social, political and disaster-related challenges, the better off the Caribbean nation will become.

Nancy Dorsinville, senior policy adviser to former President Bill Clinton in the U.N. Office of the Special Envoy to Haiti, said people across the country want to develop their "own sense of agency."

A native of Haiti, Dorsinville told a lunchtime program for congressional staffers and other invited guests in the Rayburn House Office Building that Haitians know best what local communities need.

"Participation and understanding the priorities set by the communities where the (nongovernment organizations) are working is really important," she said.

Dorsinville credited CRS, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, for involving community leaders in determining what services are needed and prioritizing needs.

Joan Rosenhauer, CRS executive vice president of U.S. operations, told the 40 people at the program that her agency has made leadership development a key part of the earthquake response.

"We have seen a need to recommit ourselves to the idea that we can't come in as people from donor nations ... and essentially run things the way we want to do it and crowd out the leadership of Haitians," she said. "We have to support the leadership of Haitians and build the leadership of Haitians."

As local leadership is developed, international agencies can move more quickly to help rebuild, explained Paul Weisenfeld, who directs Haiti recovery effort for USAID.

"Capacity building is absolutely key," he said, citing an effort that found teams of Haitians supported by USAID workers that fanned across the country to warn the most vulnerable people to take precautions as Hurricane Tomas approached in early November.

He also described how various agencies have relocated about 200,000 earthquake survivors from some of the

tattered settlements that sprouted within hours of the disaster into temporary shelters and repaired housing. Shelter building has stepped up in recent months, he said while acknowledging much work remains.

"In any normal natural disaster, if you resettle 200,000 in the year following the natural disaster that would be a significant accomplishment," he explained. "The difficulty in Haiti is the overwhelming nature of the disaster and that we've never faced more than a million people displaced in an urban setting. If you start with more than a million people and you settled 200,000 it's almost hard to notice, so we still have a long way to go."

But Weisenfeld cautioned that progress could slow is the country's transition to a new president in the coming weeks comes under question. Without referring directly to the upcoming presidential runoff between former first lady Mirlande Manigat and Jude Celestin, a protege of outgoing President Rene Preval, Weisenfeld said Haiti's rebuilding will depend on "a government partner to make the hard decisions ... to kick-start the country."

"The country needs to move forward with a legitimate government that reflects the will of the people," he said.

International observers, including U.S. officials, have questioned the result of first-round balloting Nov. 28 announced by Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council. Originally scheduled for Jan. 16, the runoff has been postponed to allow more time for preparations.

Guesly J. Delva, a physician at the University of Maryland's Department of Medicine who has traveled repeatedly to his native Haiti to treat earthquake victims, outlined the importance of developing a Haitian-run health care system.

He cited the cooperative partnership involving the university, Catholic Relief Services and the staff at destroyed St. Francis de Sales Hospital that has led to more accessible health care for Haitians.

"We really do want to do a lot of things for ourselves, but we also need some help, to get the commitment to help us build our society," he said.

In an interview with Catholic News Service after the program, Dorsinville acknowledged that Haitians often feel their concerns have been overlooked, but said it is vital for international partners to guide Haitians toward self determination.

"It's important to know that whatever we do can be complimented by whatever assistance (we receive)," she said. "It has to start with us. That's why capacity building becomes such a refrain in every speech, in every request, in every exchange.

"If we have the capacity, if we have the autonomy, if we have the agency, then it won't be so much about the promises (not kept), it will be about our ability to fulfill whatever it is that we need in terms of rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction, to build back better."

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