

Aid to Haiti

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Age-old political instability and frequent natural disasters have brought chronic poverty to Haiti, once the “Jewel of the Caribbean.” Dependent on foreign aid for decades, Haitians are barely able to take care of themselves, not to mention extend care to others. Therefore, the care and respect that Tzu Chi volunteers displayed at their aid distributions in Port-au-Prince early this year touched a chord in the hearts of many local people.

Eight thousand hectares (19,770 acres) of forest disappeared from Haiti in the past decade alone. Many of those trees were cut down for fuel. In the 1920s, more than 60 percent of Haiti was forested; now, less than two percent is.

With severe deforestation comes soil erosion. When four hurricanes in a row hit the nation in August and September 2008, bare hills profusely bled mud into the rainwater rushing down the slopes. Muddy water surrounded or even submerged farms and homes, plunging destitute families into even deeper financial straits.

Before that, skyrocketing food prices on the international markets had already hoisted domestic prices in Haiti to levels beyond the reach of many people. Rice had become so expensive that people were instead eating mud cakes made from a mixture of clay, salt, and a little vegetable oil or margarine.

These mud cakes have become a staple food for the poor. Sadly, however, even at just five U.S. cents apiece, the cakes are still too expensive for some people.

The slums

It is not surprising that some people cannot afford to eat meat. But even if they could afford to, some wouldn't. Danel Georges said, “I wouldn't eat pork because I know what pigs feed on here.” He should know. He has been a community activist for 29 years, and now he heads the Mouvement d'Unite de la Communauté per l'Intégration.

Haitians dump their garbage into open ditches. Water takes their garbage out of their sight, and that's good enough for them. However, soon there is nowhere for the garbage to go, and the ditches are clogged with trash.

Residents end up living with their own garbage day and night. So do their livestock and pets. Pigs, sheep, chickens, dogs, and cats graze the piles of garbage in the ditches and elsewhere. Owners leave their livestock out during the day to feed themselves. The animals, which are a source of income for some people in the country, spend the night indoors with people.

Our home visits revealed an amazing contrast. Despite the filthy surroundings on the outside, all the homes that we visited had spotlessly shiny floors, even though the residents cooked indoors with charcoal. Everything inside was also neat and orderly.

We learned that the government cannot afford to build landfills or garbage incinerators, and

people have no better way to dispose of their garbage. The best that people can do under the circumstances is keep their own house clean inside.

Education



Danel took us to visit nine-year-old Tonica Denis, who lived on a hill. We had to climb steep steps and walk narrow alleyways, some only wide enough for one person. In her neighborhood, a vendor had set up a table to sell such necessities as rice, sugar, salt, and laundry detergent. This table was the area's grocery store. Everything was sold in small packages, each going for between 10 and 20 gourdes (25-50 U.S. cents), a substantial sum for many Haitians whose average daily income is about 73 gourdes (US\$1.75). They have to pinch every penny.

Tonica's home for seven people covers barely 107 square feet. With only one double bed, somebody has to sleep on the floor. They were cooking soybeans when we arrived. The cupboard was bare but for some sauce. Her sister took out a one-kilogram (2.2-pound) bag of rice. That was all the food the seven of them were going to get for the day. Tonica's mother and older siblings sell things on the street. On a light day, they may pull in less than 100 gourdes (US\$2.49). Though not a huge amount, it is better than no income at all.

When we got to her home, Tonica was wearing a one-piece swimsuit. A school uniform hung neatly on the wall. Public elementary schools are free of tuition, but they only admit students who wear uniforms. This prevents some children from attending school altogether. Many parents work hard to save money for their children's uniforms. Unfortunately, children grow fast, and they soon outgrow their uniforms. This forces them to quit school and wait for their parents to save up for more uniforms. It is therefore not uncommon for a class to have age disparities of up to five years among its students.

Tonica has a suitable school uniform, so she can go to school to study and eat lunch. For her, school is a place of joy and hope, a place to improve her prospects for the future.

Schools

École Nationale Republique du l'Uruguay /Guatemala in Port-au-Prince is also a place of hope for its 1,200 students. The school was built in 1956 with the help of the governments of Uruguay and Guatemala. In the mornings the school goes by the name with "Guatemala" in it, and in the afternoons that is replaced with "Uruguay."

After a half century of service, the school building is no longer safe. However, it remains in use because there is no budget for repair. It is a three-story building with ten classrooms. More than 20 students pack into each 107-square-foot classroom. The school doesn't have a single lighting fixture—big holes in the walls admit sunlight into the rooms. When there isn't enough natural lighting, they use candles.

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The rest of the school is in no better shape, either. UNICEF built a water tank for the school, but it was never able to get a steady supply of water. One can tell when there is no water in the tank because toilet odors pervade the campus.

Compared with other schools in Haiti, this one is by no means in particularly bad repair. More than 150 schools in the nation are just as dilapidated. It can be dangerous attending classes in such unsafe structures. Indeed, a school building in the capital collapsed in November 2008, taking nearly a hundred lives.

Tzu Chi gets involved

This disaster and the story of the clay cakes made international news. With the assistance of Hsu Mien-sheng (許明文), the Taiwanese ambassador to Haiti, and Envoy Qi Wang-de (齊望德), Tzu Chi volunteers from the United States arrived in Haiti at the end of November to size up the situation. They decided to hold a large-scale aid distribution while assessing the feasibility of educational and medical assistance to the nation.

Actually, the love of Tzu Chi volunteers had already reached Haiti ten years earlier. In 1998, Hurricane Georges swept across the Caribbean, ravaging many countries in Central and South America. Tzu Chi promptly responded with a clothing drive and sent 60 cargo containers of cleaned and neatly folded used clothes to the area. Four of the containers went to Haiti.

On January 14, 2009, volunteers from the United States, St. Martin, and the Dominican Republic arrived at École Nationale République du l'Uruguay/Guatemala, the school whose name alternates with time of day to honor its two benefactors. It would serve as one of the two Tzu Chi distribution sites.

When the volunteer group arrived, the malodorous school restrooms immediately caught everyone's attention. Volunteers dug holes, scooped feces out of the restrooms into the holes, and finally packed the dirt back in the holes.

They picked up scattered garbage and filled potholes on the school grounds to facilitate a smooth delivery of aid items into the school for distribution.

The students were curious about the strangers. Some tried to talk to the volunteers, and some just squatted and looked on. Then a boy picked up a piece of trash, and immediately several others followed suit. Volunteer Mu Jia-hui (穆家慧) put her newly acquired French to use: "Merci! Thank you," something that every child understood. Perhaps in the future, some of the children will pick up rubbish on campus or on the street when they see it.

The volunteers were almost ready for the distribution, but not quite.



Extraordinary, Act I—Not doing it for oneself

To make the relief distribution to 3,300 families as smooth as possible, members of the Tzu Chi advance team, employees of Overseas Engineering & Construction Co. (OECC), and local volunteers had to gear up first.

The volunteers needed to pack aid items into 6,600 buckets, and they had just four and a half days to complete this task. So everyone hustled to fill each bucket from piles of items like rice, corn meal, cooking oil, sugar, and dental hygiene packs. Blankets made from recycled PET bottles were too bulky, so they weren't packed in a bucket. At the end of the assembly line, a lid was hammered on each filled bucket.

Many people worked long hours, from early morning, through 30° Celsius (86° F) heat during the day, until late at night, taxing their stamina to the limit. Though they were exhausted, they didn't complain.

"I'm doing this for my country, not for money. Do you understand?" This remark came from a local volunteer, who said that he used to care about making money above all else. Through his time working with volunteers, he had experienced unselfish and unsophisticated happiness. Others had similar satisfaction: Some OECC drivers went to help with the distribution preparation whenever they weren't needed at work, even after hours.

This was quite a departure from the norm in Haiti. Danel explained, "As a rule, individual people in my nation take good care of their own personal well-being. However, few of them work together towards societal or group well-being. We need more spiritual upbringing [like this]."

Cheers erupted among the 46 people who took part in the prep work when the 6,600th and last lid was hammered on its bucket. The participants could not easily communicate with each other since they spoke different languages. However, having toiled through the preparation together, they seemed to have developed a unique language of mutual understanding and bonding that made oral communication redundant.

Extraordinary, act II—Orderly distributions



Two distributions took place on January 15 and 16, at École Nationale République du l'Uruguay/Guatemala and École Foyer Culturel Saint-Vincent de Paul. Distribution claim checks had gone out beforehand to the eligible families. Many people could not believe that, with that little claim check, they were going to receive a month's worth of supplies free of charge.

Some people couldn't wait. About a hundred of them showed up almost three hours before the event was due to open. The venue suddenly became crowded and disorganized. Tzu Chi volunteers, with the help of translators, quickly turned the four huddling clusters of people into a single line. Order was established before it had a chance to spin out of control.

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Order is a rare commodity in this nation. However, now the recipients were queuing up in an orderly long line. Nobody was jockeying for an advantageous spot to grab supplies before they ran out. Nobody needed to. This was the first time that many of them had experienced such tranquility during a distribution.

Prior distributions given by other groups were not like this in the least. Typically they didn't so much unload their aid goods as jettison them off their trucks and take off, leaving behind a chaos of pushing and shoving. And the result was almost always the strongest people getting the bulk of the goods. The infirm and the elderly—those in most need of help—ended up with little or nothing. Soon, a culture of “survival of the fittest” emerged, and it has pervaded the nation ever since.

Tzu Chi volunteers did not just heft aid goods out of the trucks and leave. Quite on the contrary, they carefully and respectfully put them in the hands of the recipients. “These ‘white people’ respect us—they bow to us when they give us things!” a recipient exclaimed. Aid recipients were amazed by this display of humility.

David Chang (張長), deputy general manager of OECC in Haiti, remarked that in less than two months Tzu Chi volunteers had completed everything from damage assessment to aid distribution. It was proof enough that Tzu Chi really meant to help, and the locals knew it.

Danel said to Tzu Chi volunteers, “You have brought us food not only for our stomachs but also for our spirits. I see your love and respect in the faces of my fellow countrymen.” He pointed at his compatriots who were walking out of the school with buckets of goods. He believed that when the seeds of goodness sown by Tzu Chi spread and take root in Haiti, the country will definitely change for the better.

Republic of Haiti at a Glance

- Sharing the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, Haiti has an area of 27,750 square kilometers (10,714 square miles) and a population of about nine million people.
- About 40 percent of the population are younger than 14 years old, and 50 percent are illiterate. The majority of Haitians are Catholic.
- Haiti was the first independent nation in Latin America (from France in 1804), and it is the only French-speaking nation in Central and South Americas. However, the lack of an effective democratic system has led the nation to chronic political instability and social unrest. United Nations peace-keeping forces have been stationed in the nation to maintain stability since 2004.
- Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and one of the least developed in the world, according to the United Nations. Most people rely on agriculture for a living, but the

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nation relies on imports for 80 percent of its food. Though most farmers own small farms, unreliable irrigation systems and manual cultivation techniques have led to poor productivity.

- The average daily income for the nation is less than two American dollars. Eighty percent of Haitians live below the poverty line, and 54 percent exist in abject poverty.

Text and Photographs by Chen Jian-kai
Translated by Tang Yau-yang