



IS Academy/Cordaid research on human security in Haiti | meeting report

On March 28, 2013, Cordaid presented the outcome of its research on human security in Haiti. Participants came from diverse backgrounds, including various NGOs, the Haitian diaspora in the Netherlands, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wageningen University, and various others with an interest in the topic. The meeting was chaired by Ron Delnoije of Cordaid¹, Talitha Stam (research coordinator for Cordaid) was the main presenter. Gemma van der Haar (Disaster Studies), Wim de Regt (formerly Oxfam Novib, now Amnesty International) and Vena Nieuwelink-Bazelais (Association for Haitians in the Netherlands) gave a short response to the research, from their different angles.

Presentation Cordaid

The meeting was opened by **Ron Delnoije**, who shortly set out the main motivation for the research: Cordaid's longstanding involvement in Haiti (over 30 years); recent international NGO (INGO) trends to more and more do their own implementation; combined with the relief period after the 2010 earthquake when INGOs were very dominant, while they are now starting to close local offices (Cordaid has replaced its emergency response office by a liaison office); and Cordaid's interest in economic recovery. **Bart Weijs** and **Thea Hilhorst** introduced the IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States, explaining how the dominant trend in research on fragile states was to focus on the state, which led the Academy to take strong interest in the socio-economic aspects of fragile contexts.

Talitha Stam then continued with an overview of the IS Academy research by Cordaid. This started with a pilot study in Mombin Crochu at the end of 2011, which was followed by three student researches and one study by herself in the course of 2012. The earthquake in 2010 was a starting point, as it "revealed how structures were organised, what poor and fragile actually mean, and how people stay alive". The pilot study resulted in the report 'Planting Strategies', and investigated how the earthquake impacted rural livelihood strategies: how do people survive, and whom do they go to if the state does not provide? The study showed that *yonn ede lòt*, "one is helping the other", people worked together at three levels: the family, the *gwoupmans*, and local community organisations supported by NGOs. The main issue was the underlying power relations: who decides who gets what. Unlike traditional studies that paint a static picture of conservative rural areas, this study presents a dynamic image, where a new way of working introduced by NGOs (working in *gwoupmans*) successfully took on life of its own.

Besides the pilot study, the subsequent research was also shaped by the research question developed by Oxfam Novib in its research for the IS Academy: how do people interact with each other and local governance institutions (state/non state formal/informal) to shape their own human security? Three subtopics were defined:

1. Governance, the interaction of Haitians with local government, and other governance actors;
2. access, use of and rights to agricultural land;
3. and entrepreneurship & livelihoods, market forces of agricultural produce.

A large part of the research was conducted by students: two from Haiti, and one Italian student. Research methods consisted of participant observation and interviews, as well as two surveys in collaboration with ONAVC, a research institute linked to the Haitian state university.

Results of the studies: in Tisous, Port-au-Prince, 40-50% of the houses were destroyed during the earthquake, and Cordaid developed a large shelter programme. NGOs were in charge of basic service provision. The study, with a focus on water

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¹ Ron Delnoije kindly stood in for Astrid Frey, who is responsible at Cordaid for the participation in the IS Academy, and unfortunately was unable to be present at the meeting.

provision, found that the government was no supplier, and was invisible to the local people. In Petit Boucan, where 75% of the buildings were destroyed, the study shows that decentralised government was not functioning well, with local representatives indicating they lacked the means to take action. There was a well-established local NGO with over 30 years of experience, ITECA, which channelled a lot of relief aid. Residents were active in local grassroots organisations, organised themselves, and said “we will form our own government”. Mombin Crochu, on the other hand, was less directly affected by the earthquake, and experienced strong temporary counter-migration afterwards. Here the study focused on peasants’ approaches to securing their livelihoods at a local level, and its findings confirm the existence of parallel formal and informal systems governing land. For the fourth, final study, Talitha Stam showed a video as an introduction.² This study gives an account of the entrepreneurial strategies of *Madam Saras*, Haitian women who buy produce in rural areas and sell this at markets. These women also face a series of difficulties, ranging from the bad quality of roads, to lack of shelter and threats of violence.

In conclusion: the studies succeeded in identifying the main institutions in local governance. Interaction of local residents with these institutions varies, and this is a major factor in conflicts. The studies provide some answers, but also leave room for further questions and debate.

Discussants

Gemma van der Haar (WUR/Disaster Studies, IS Academy) was the first discussant, explaining the relevance of the issues described. It is crucial to look at *Madam Saras* in terms of entrepreneurial strategies, instead of coping: to see them as entrepreneurs, a crucial element of the chain from gardens to markets. You can see them as vibrant, and resilient, but also as fragile. Their vulnerability in terms of security is striking. It is also interesting to ask where the state comes into the picture: it seems quite absent in these studies, but does it matter if we do not see it? The absence of the state does not necessarily mean there is a governance gap: we see a vibrant social fabric, with new ways of organisation developing such as *gwoupmans*. Furthermore, it is important to note, where is the earthquake in these stories? The research focus was on Haiti, because of the earthquake, but it has not surfaced much in the studies, which tells us that many things keep on going. Things have shifted after the disaster, but more in terms of the interface, how people organise and interact with NGOs that have come in. This emphasises the importance of interventions that work with what is already there, the existing ways of people to deal with their situation, and of doing more research on this subject.

Wim de Regt (formerly Oxfam Novib, now Amnesty International) then supplied some background to how Oxfam Novib developed its IS Academy research. Oxfam Novib was struck by local initiatives in Somalia, a typical fragile state, where locally remarkable things happened, sometimes with diaspora support. This led Oxfam Novib to ask how this develops, and how international NGOs can work with these local structures. The Oxfam Novib studies show the interaction of local systems and the state. The Cordaid studies on Haiti show the traditional structure of the *Madam Saras*, and how they dealt with the earthquake, and it would be interesting to see how the earthquake affected other traditional (local) structures.

Vena Nieuwelink-Bazelais (Association for Haitians in the Netherlands) gave a short description of the involvement of the Haitian diaspora. The earthquake worsened the many problems that already existed. The diaspora plays an important role: it is the custom to support family. After the earthquake, this support extended to others, such as neighbours of family members. Through associations as the one in the Netherlands, the diaspora can gain publicity for Haiti, to motivate others to invest in the country. The educated diaspora can share their talents with the government.

Discussion

The discussion was integrated in the presentations, as the participants frequently responded during the presentations. A major focus lay on the study of the *Madam Saras*. Cordaid was especially interested in their practices, how they are organised, and to what extent they manage to add value through their transactions. *Madam Saras* present a very diverse group: with some so successful they own trucks and trade with China, while others barely manage to make a living. The women under study were ordinary rural women, organised informally through arrangements for microfinance, or travelling with friends. The supply of credit to these women, and providing them with safe ways to deposit their money, is what Cordaid is currently looking into.

² The video is an introduction to the study of the *Madam Saras*, showing a glimpse of the life of one *Madam Sara* who buys and sells agricultural produce for a living. The video will be accessible soon, through the website of Cordaid.

Other comments had to do with the role of the government, and how it is important not to romanticise. Related to the government, the question was raised whether the government should be a supplier of water, and whether it is a supplier in the rest of the world. Additionally, what are local expectations of the government? If people have little expectations, what are consequences for the legitimacy of the state? Thea Hilhorst warned that it is important to realise that though some institutions survive and become stronger, such as the *Madam Saras* in this case, there are also many cases in which institutions get weaker: entrepreneurship should not be romanticised. Finally, Piet Spaarman (head of mission at Cordaid Haiti from 2010 to 2012) reflected on how it is important for relief organisations to have analytical competence, next to people who are doing relief work.