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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Underlying Tragedy

By DAVID BROOKS

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On Oct. 17, 1989, a major earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 struck the Bay Area in Northern California. Sixty-three people were killed. This week, a major earthquake, also measuring a magnitude of 7.0, struck near Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The Red Cross estimates that between 45,000 and 50,000 people have died.



David Brooks

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This is not a natural disaster story. This is a poverty story. It's a story about poorly constructed buildings, bad infrastructure and terrible public services. On Thursday, President Obama told the people of Haiti: "You will not be forsaken; you will not be forgotten." If he is going to remain faithful to that vow then he is going to have to use this tragedy as an occasion to rethink our approach to global poverty. He's going to have to acknowledge a few difficult truths.

The first of those truths is that we don't know how to use aid to reduce poverty. Over the past few decades, the world has spent trillions of dollars to generate growth in the developing world. The countries that have not received much aid, like China, have seen tremendous growth and tremendous poverty reductions. The countries that have received aid, like Haiti, have not.

In the recent anthology "What Works in Development?," a group of economists try to sort out what we've learned. The picture is grim. There are no policy levers that consistently correlate to increased growth. There is nearly zero correlation between how a developing economy does one decade and how it does the next. There is no consistently proven way to reduce corruption. Even improving governing institutions doesn't seem to produce the expected results.

The chastened tone of these essays is captured by the economist Abhijit Banerjee: "It is not clear to us that the best way to get growth is to do growth policy of any form. Perhaps making growth happen is ultimately beyond our control."

The second hard truth is that micro-aid is vital but insufficient. Given the failures of macrodevelopment, aid organizations often focus on microprojects. More than 10,000 organizations perform missions of this sort in Haiti. By some estimates, Haiti has more nongovernmental organizations per capita than any other place on earth. They are doing the Lord's work, especially these days, but even a blizzard of these efforts does not seem to add up to comprehensive change.

Third, it is time to put the thorny issue of culture at the center of efforts to tackle global poverty. Why is Haiti so poor? Well, it has a history of oppression, slavery and colonialism. But so does Barbados, and Barbados is doing pretty well. Haiti has endured ruthless dictators, corruption and foreign invasions. But so has the Dominican Republic, and the D.R. is in much better shape. Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the same island and the same basic environment, yet the border between the two societies offers one of the starkest contrasts on earth — with trees and progress on one side, and deforestation and poverty and early death on the other.

As Lawrence E. Harrison explained in his book "The Central Liberal Truth," Haiti, like most of the world's poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. There are high levels of social mistrust. Responsibility is often not internalized. Child-rearing practices often involve neglect in the early years and harsh retribution when kids hit 9 or 10.

We're all supposed to politely respect each other's cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and a horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them.

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Fourth, it's time to promote locally led paternalism. In this country, we first tried to tackle poverty by throwing money at it, just as we did abroad. Then we tried microcommunity efforts, just as we did abroad. But the programs that really work involve intrusive paternalism.

These programs, like the Harlem Children's Zone and the No Excuses schools, are led by people who figure they don't understand all the factors that have contributed to poverty, but they don't care. They are going to replace parts of the local culture with a highly demanding, highly intensive culture of achievement — involving everything from new child-rearing practices to stricter schools to better job performance.

It's time to take that approach abroad, too. It's time to find self-confident local leaders who will create No Excuses countercultures in places like Haiti, surrounding people — maybe just in a neighborhood or a school — with middle-class assumptions, an achievement ethos and tough, measurable demands.

The late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington used to acknowledge that cultural change is hard, but cultures do change after major traumas. This earthquake is certainly a trauma. The only question is whether the outside world continues with the same old, same old.

A version of this article appeared in print on January 15, 2010, on page A27 of the New York edition.

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