

Editor's comment

Natural disasters



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As I write this the world is starting to forget the disaster that was the earthquake in Haiti. When you read this, the event will be even less newsworthy. As news was coming through, along with horrifying footage of the devastation, the Australian Open was showing on another satellite channel, which struck me as totally incongruous. It reminded me of another occasion, many years ago, when I was doing the ironing in our sitting room in Labrador, Canada, and watching footage of a village held hostage to a sniper in the Balkans.

The scale of the disaster in Haiti is almost unprecedented. The total number of dead will not be known for some time, but at least 1.5 million people have been displaced – most of them have lost everything. By hitting Port-au-Prince, the earthquake made sure that one of the poorest countries in the world will remain even poorer for a long time. According to the World Health Organization, the damage to Haiti's infrastructure is 'almost unbelievable'.

However, in spite of the ease with which we in our comfortable homes can see exactly what is happening to people in

these situations, responses are not always as humanitarian as you might hope. Soon after the disaster struck, I was talking to someone now living in the UK who told me that she was really angry with the Haitians for 'asking for aid'. After all, surely they could just sort themselves out? In the next breath this same person was telling me how awful it was to see footage of a small boy, paralysed with fear, sitting on his own among the devastation. I wondered what had happened to our humanity.

On the other hand, there has been an overwhelming response by ordinary people to fund-raising efforts, including the R1.4 million raised by a young boy in the UK who did a charity cycle. And the response of the international community was fast and targeted, particularly in the area of medical help.

But, the fact remains that the rich world is becoming increasingly uninterested in the disasters that strike the poor world – and the social responses such as migration that result from either natural disaster or economic and political mismanagement. I have long shared a vision of 'fortress Europe' with various fiction writers and also political and economic commentators.

And Europe, and the rest of the rich world, is slowly, but inexorably, closing its doors.

It is easy for me, as a privileged member of society, living comfortably in a country with just about the worst Gini coefficient in the world, to have some sympathy with people who feel that they work hard for what they have – why should they share with others?

Haiti, and indeed many poorly developed areas of the world, is going to continue to need aid from the rich world – and Haiti will need it for long after the rubble is cleared away and people are able to start rebuilding their lives. But is this aid going to be forthcoming, or are those of us who can give it going to decide that the poor can 'sort themselves out'?

Some years ago I had the privilege of interviewing Desmond Tutu. He told me that he believes that we live in a 'moral universe' and none of us can divorce ourselves from either the actions of others or the plight of those who have less than we do. I always come back to these words whenever I feel that I am in danger of losing sight of the inequalities around me.

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