

A Different Point Of View

The response by Africa to the Haitian disaster dispels the myth Africans are only good at receiving aid

African Decisions magazine

Disasters appeal to the minds and hearts of people. Whether rich or poor, the emotional response is usually the same—people rally to help where they can.

This was certainly the case when Haiti was struck by a violent earthquake on 12 January, resulting in the deaths of more than 200 000 people and leaving over a million homeless. But there was something unique in the response to this particular disaster.

Africa dispelled the usual image of itself as helpless by playing a pivotal role in disaster recovery efforts in Haiti. The poverty levels of the continent and many of its challenges did not hinder it from making aid contributions. It was arguably one of the most important paradigm shifts concerning the continent's efforts towards developmentalism.

The entire world was shaken by the massive destruction of the already poverty stricken and troubled nation of Haiti. The first people to arrive in the disaster zone, such as native musician Wyclef Jean—who carried out rescue efforts through his Yéle Haiti Foundation—could only describe what they saw as 'apocalyptic', reminiscent of Robert Kaplan's 1994 article in the Atlantic Monthly 'The Coming Anarchy'.

But Haiti was only the first of a string of subsequent disasters that occurred in the following weeks. Further havoc was wreaked in Uganda, Chile, Taiwan and Turkey.

With regards to previous disasters—such as floods, tsunamis and hurricanes—in different parts of the world, no African governments moved as swiftly or with such determination as they did this time.

Senegal, for example, offered land and citizenship to Haitians wanting to settle in the West African country. Other African countries offered assistance in the

form of donations and rescue missions. Most importantly the Africa for Haiti campaign was created.

This people to people initiative is spearheaded by Graça Machel and a group of pan African institutions which include TrustAfrica, African Monitor, Southern Africa Trust and Civicus, among others. The campaign has spread across the continent and involves all sectors of society—from artists to business people to ordinary Africans, all making some form of contribution.

The campaign's aim is firstly to develop solidarity with the Haitian people and secondly, to rebuild hope and contribute towards the reconstruction of civil society through community projects.

Although different groups have responded in different ways to past disasters, no concerted effort has ever been made to collectively respond as is happening today. This is a different image of the continent as to what is popularly represented in the media: a fragmented continent, chaotic, poor and underdeveloped.

Until the recent leading role played by South Africa in the G20, Africa's position in global relations has been marginal. The response by Africa to the Haitian disaster dispels the myth that Africans are only good at receiving aid. Through this it is clear that Africa is not only giving to other nations but is playing an important developmental role globally.

By nature, all Africans, whether poor or rich, are philanthropic and the Africa for Haiti campaign demonstrates that it is possible for Africans to raise resources from their own shores, not only for their own development, but also to play a significant role in the greater global community, whether through south south or north south co operation.

This is an important shift in Africa's drive to rebrand and reposition itself, to prove what it is capable of in the realm of international trade and politics.

Zimbabwean-born Dr. Bhekinkosi Moyo is an author and director of programs at TrustAfrica, a pan-African foundation based in Dakar, Senegal. He writes extensively on democracy, development, and politics.