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Rebuilding Geography in Haiti

Five years ago this month, this column described AAG's efforts, working together with our members, to respond to the devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.¹ The online clearinghouse and special fund that we organized with support from AAG members helped rebuild geography departments in the hardest-hit areas. We continue to hear from faculty and students in those departments about the difference these resources have made in their personal and professional recovery. For the AAG, this experience helped us appreciate, in a very direct way, the importance of coordinated disaster response and of understanding the long-term nature of recovery.

Since Katrina, we have continued to witness and respond to disaster—some at a distance, others closer to home. In 2010, some of the more visible examples include the devastating earthquake in Haiti, recent floods in Pakistan inundating one-fifth of the country, and the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon well with 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, another disaster challenge for Louisianans and their neighbors. The number of disasters around the world each year has been steadily increasing, and this trajectory is unlikely to change given predicted changes in climate and corresponding impacts. All require resources for response and recovery. Geographic knowledge and information, geospatial technologies, and web-based networking, not to mention the expertise to work in this context, are resources that have become increasingly essential in disaster planning, vulnerability assessment, response, and recovery.

In the five years since Katrina, the AAG and its members have become more engaged in collaborative efforts to build capacity for disaster response and recovery, with an emphasis on the contributions of geography and GIScience to these efforts. For example, the AAG has participated in a range of activities to support rebuilding in Haiti. Individual AAG members have also independently taken action to assist Haiti (and other disaster-impacted regions). At a broader level, we are working on international efforts to create a rapid response infrastructure and capability for global disaster reduction and

recovery. These efforts are described in further detail below.

Haiti

On January 12, 2010 at 16:43:10 local time, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, centered near its capital, Port-au-Prince. More than 300,000 people were killed. Another 300,000 were injured. About 1.5 million live in tent encampments. Individuals important to the geography community in Haiti were among those who were tragically lost; key infrastructure was destroyed or severely damaged.

The headquarters of Haiti's National Center for Geospatial Information (CNIGS) was destroyed and its gifted Director, Gina Porcena Meneus, and five staff members were killed. Established in 2005 with support from the United States and European Union, CNIGS' role is to develop geospatial information for sustainable development and natural hazard mitigation. Operating under the Haitian Ministry of Planning, CNIGS' geospatial data and imagery archive was one of the most comprehensive in the region prior to the earthquake.ⁱⁱ However, much of this spatial data infrastructure, now desperately needed for recovery planning and redevelopment, was lost. CNIGS was also the headquarters for Haiti's national chapter of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH).

George Anglade, distinguished Haitian-Canadian geographer, writer, and political activist, also perished in the earthquake along with his wife of 43 years. He was one of the founders of the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) and a professor of social geography there for more than 30 years before retiring in 2002. Professor Anglade actively participated in actions for a democratic Haiti.ⁱⁱⁱ

Haiti's leading universities, eight that are members of Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), were devastated. The State University of Haiti (UEH), by far the largest with approximately 15,000 students and 11 faculties in locations around Port-au-Prince (and 10,000 students in the provinces), saw most of its buildings (more than 90%) destroyed or severely damaged in the earthquake. UEH has a developing



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geography program with expertise in human, economic, rural, and population geography.

The AAG and its members have been involved in responding to the Haiti earthquake in many ways, from providing aid and information in the immediate aftermath of the disaster to capacity building activities focused on long-term efforts to rebuild the country. The AAG office helped coordinate and respond to requests for geographic expertise in the days and weeks following the earthquake. Geographers from the U.S. and around the world volunteered their time and expertise through organizations such as the International Network of Crisis Mappers, OpenStreetMap, and GISCorps to acquire critical data and create maps guiding emergency responders in initial rescue and relief efforts.

The AAG has engaged with the U.S. State Department, private industry, and other organizations on how to rebuild CNIGS, including how to use the data collected during the earthquake response to reconstitute its lost assets, replace equipment and infrastructure, and build GIS expertise. We have also been working with the State Department to help identify senior level candidates for the newly established position of Chief Geospatial Information Officer. The CGIO will coordinate the use of geographic information and advise the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission and Government of Haiti on planning and reconstruction activities. A geographic knowledge and information strategy is needed for Haiti's recovery and development.

Haiti's recovery and development also require long-term engagement in capacity building. In support of this goal, the AAG co-sponsored and participated in a workshop organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and its Caribbean Division. The workshop, entitled *Advancing Capacity for Haitian Science and Science Education*, was held July 10-18, 2010, in San Juan, Puerto Rico and in Haiti. Haitian scientists and educators along with colleagues from the U.S., Puerto Rico, Canada, and Africa participated, and developed nearly 40 specific preliminary goals and recommendations to advance science and science education in Haiti. A final report (co-authored by AAG staff) and recommendations will be released by AAAS later this year.^{iv} Separately, AAG member, Robert Maguire, Associate Professor of International Studies at Trinity Washington University and Chair of the Haiti Working Group at the U.S. Institute of Peace, shared his expertise and views about rebuilding Haiti in testimony presented before the U.S. Senate's Subcommittee on International Development and Foreign Assistance, Economic Affairs, and International Environmental Protection.

Professor Maguire has worked in Haiti since 1974, and also shared his vision for Haiti's future in an OpEd to AAG members.^v

The AAG will continue its engagement with several long-term efforts to support Haiti recovery and reconstruction. We also have created and encourage donations by geographers and others to the *AAG Haiti Recovery and Reconstruction Fund* to help support the rebuilding of university geography programs in Haiti, including the re-establishment of CNIGS, with both their institutional and human capital needs. This Fund will also be used to subsidize no-cost membership in the AAG for interested Haitian geographers and their students through the AAG's existing Developing Regions Membership Program. While membership is already substantially discounted, such support is essential given the dire situation affecting Haitian universities. When the AAAS report and recommendations on advancing science and science education capacity is finalized, we will continue to work closely with AAAS on its dissemination to key stakeholder groups (e.g., donor community) and identify specific areas in which the AAG and its members can contribute and act in collaboration with the geography and GIS community in Haiti. We would also like to encourage sessions at the 2011 Annual Meeting in Seattle focused on geographers' activities and research—immediate and long term—relevant to response, recovery, and reconstruction in Haiti.^{vi}

Infrastructure for Global Disaster Reduction and Recovery

The response to the earthquake in Haiti and other disasters of the early 21st century demonstrates the necessity of harnessing geographic knowledge, technologies and data to coordinate relief and recovery. Yet, as Haiti illustrates, challenges to reducing disaster vulnerability, risk, and loss of life and infrastructure remain. At the same time, opportunities exist to strengthen and leverage existing programs and networks for better coordination, positioning, and delivery of needed resources and to improve response timeframes through a comprehensive, global network of rapidly accessible geographic information at multiple scales.

Beginning in early 2010, the AAG met several times with representatives of the Clinton Foundation, Esri, AGEDI (Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and others to discuss plans for the Eye on Earth (EoE) Summit to be held in 2011, hosted by the Government of Abu Dhabi. The purpose of the summit is to address the needs associated with creating international information networks that provide access to the best available environmental and social data for decision-making from local to global scales. At the suggestion

of the Clinton Foundation, this working group is developing the concept of a rapid response infrastructure focused on disaster relief and recovery in connection with EoE called the FALCON (First Assist Locator and Coordinated Operations Network) Initiative. This initiative is envisioned "as a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) to address GIS and spatial data infrastructure capacity building for more effective disaster planning and response and climate change adaptation with special emphasis on those most vulnerable communities and countries in the world."^{vii} FALCON is conceived as building on current capacity in disaster reduction and recovery available through, for example, the Global Facility for Disaster Risk and Reduction (GFDRR) of the World Bank, United Nations International Strategy for Global Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and other governmental and non-governmental organizations that are part of the disaster and humanitarian communities. The AAG will continue its work with the Clinton Foundation, AGEDI and others to develop and refine this Initiative over the next year. We look forward to sharing updates about this and other activities in a future issue of the *AAG Newsletter*.

If you wish to support recovery efforts for Haitian geographers and university geography programs, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the *AAG Haiti Recovery and Reconstruction Fund*. For more information, or to make a donation, please visit www.aag.org/Haiti, or use the form on page 23 of this Newsletter. Thank you for your support of the AAG's efforts to help rebuild geography in Haiti. ■

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ⁱRichardson, D. 2005. Building the AAG's Capacity to Respond Quickly. *AAG Newsletter* (40)9:2,9.

ⁱⁱUS Department of State Humanitarian Information Unit. July 2010. *Haiti Earthquake: Breaking New Ground in the Humanitarian Information Landscape*. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rwb.nsf/db900sid/MUMA-88U4XA?OpenDocument> (accessed September 2, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱNecrology for George Anglade. 2010. *AAG Newsletter* (45)2:12.

^{iv}Lempinen, E. (ed). 2010. Scientists, Educators Chart Course for Haiti's Future Prosperity. *Science* (329):1030.

^vMaguire, R. 2010. After the Earthquake: Re-balancing Haiti. *AAG Newsletter* (45)4:11.

^{vi}If you would like to help organize a session for the 2011 Annual Meeting about response and recovery activities and research following the earthquake in Haiti, please contact Jean McKendry (jmckendry@aag.org).

^{vii}FALCON discussion draft, August 15, 2010.