

It's Good to Talk, but Better to Listen

“The Tanbou project harnesses people power to combat corruption in Haiti”

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Introduction

Under a blazing Caribbean sun, Sandra Félicien stood in front of a crowd of impoverished people, who like herself, have been homeless since the earthquake of 12 January 2010. After spending months living in tents or makeshift shelters, their patience was at breaking point. Voices rose in anger as they complained of their poverty and the constant gnawing hunger they suffered. They were fearful about living under canvas during the worst of the hurricane season. They wanted paying jobs to help them back on their feet, to buy essentials like food and perhaps save towards children's school fees.

Sandra spoke quietly in Haitian Creole and counseled patience. The crowd's anger subsided a little as she explained that one way to seek change was to appeal for help through letter writing. Near Sandra's tent, a simple wooden information booth, complete with “suggestion box” placed there by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

We called it the Tanbou Project after the Creole word for the Haitian drums whose beat can be heard day and night across Port au Prince. There are now over 140 such Information booths scattered amongst the 1,300 camps where over 1.5 million homeless people had been living since the quake. The booths are a spinoff of a program funded last year by the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) to encourage two-way communication with the displaced. Since as many as 50% of Haitians are illiterate, it was uncertain how they would react to the invitation just to write letters. But days after the booths were installed; the letterboxes began to fill up. In one case over 900 earnest letters were dropped into a booth in Cite Soleil, the poorest of poor neighborhoods, over three days. The deluge of letters was a glimpse into the often hidden, harsh and precarious life being lived by an estimated third of the population of the capital Port-au-Prince.

Sandra Félicien and her fellow homeless were moved to a desolate camp in Corail-Cesselesse, high above the city. It's a beautiful, but desolate place with desert-like temperatures and high winds, often either choked with dust or swarming with flies. Sandra's own situation is pretty dire. Her husband, a high-school literature teacher, was killed during the 30 seconds the quake took to flatten so many buildings in Haiti.

Left destitute, she and her six-year-old son depend on the charity of others to survive. She was evacuated to Corail when the malarial roadside camp was evacuated by in July. She soon took up her pen and began firing off letters. Sandra typically wrote two a week, one seeking help for herself and her son, a second

pleading for her neighbors in the camp. By implication, she also wrote on behalf of more than one million Haitians displaced by the quake and living under the dark shadow of a cholera epidemic.

There is freedom of speech in abundance in Haiti, but whether those living on the margins of society are listened to, is another matter. Sandra and her fellow letter writers were determined to be heard. Each of their letters became a message in a bottle, giving voice to the voiceless of Haiti.

When the New York Times journalist Deborah Sontag heard about the letters project, she tracked down the prolific Sandra. Her front page story told of Haitians crying for help through letters written on scraps of paper. Amidst the flotsam of emails and text messages that dominate modern life, these poignant letters had an authenticity that is hard to ignore. Typically written with a politeness of tone and old-fashioned formality, many of the letter harken to a bygone age: “*Good day and goodnight,*” wrote Marie Livia Calixte of Delmas, “*It is my pleasure to seize the occasion to write a letter... At the same time, it is with great sadness that I talk about the deplorable and miserable situation I live in, deplorable and miserable as it is. I thank God for allowing me to survive and I also thank all those who have helped me to write and continue to help me do so.*”

Whether scrawled with a childish hand or written in elegant calligraphy, the letters from the camps are a constant reminder that the crisis being endured by those who lost their homes and loved ones is unending. Politely but firmly, the homeless letter writers of Haiti are demanding their right to be heard.

The 5,000 letters from the displaced of Haiti – a living blog – in effect were all read and catalogued. Urgent cases received a quick response; others became part a “crowd-voicing” effort to listen to the earthquake displaced. This is now being transformed into a nationwide anti-corruption and aid accountability system that will encourage people across Haiti to write letter or make phone calls if they feel aid is being diverted or stolen.

The aim is to encourage a “national conversation” encouraging a flow of information between affected communities, humanitarian actors and local service providers. Trust in media is in short supply in Haiti, but radio is still believed by 38% of the IDP population compared to a trust level of 15% for local authorities.

The intention of the [*Tanbou Project*](#) is to ensure transparency in the reconstruction process by putting in place a system that has the potential to become both popular and sustainable and will ensure that disaster affected populations have the critical information they need to enable them to make informed decisions about their wellbeing.

In the subsequent six months 5,000 letters were received, providing a constructive outlet for desperate people to express themselves, describe their needs/demands and provide a window into their lives for those not living in camps. The letter boxes sensitized humanitarian responders in the camps to IDP perceptions, encouraging improved aid delivery. Moreover, the volume of letters received confirmed the desire of IDPs to communicate with donors and responders and highlighted the fact that challenges emanate from a lack of opportunities for popular engagement in governance and the absence of a national conversation on recovery, reconstruction and displacement.

The contents of the letters are summarized and added to a database where they are available to users and the general public without the private details of the writer.

Background

Haiti's 12 January 2010 earthquake killed an estimated 250,000, left the capital in ruins, the government in disarray and displaced 1.5 million people. The October 2010 cholera outbreak, the first in many decades which has claimed the lives of 4,533 as of [21 February 2011](#), only added to the country's woes. Haiti's sharply divided politics and lack of popular support has challenged recovery efforts and a perceived lack of transparency and accountability by national and international actors (see [Transparency International](#)) have only added to this combustible mix. Haiti is trapped in a vicious cycle of systemic poverty, lack of empowerment and mistrust.

A fundamental problem of Haiti remains the exclusion of the country's poor and middle classes and what noted Haitian expert Robert E Maguire has coined the "predatory elite, to describe the peculiar blend of gangsterism, populism and outright theft that has characterized the country for most of its two-hundred-year history¹. Lack of popular support for political processes undermines trust in government and a dearth of opportunities for civic engagement finds expression in street violence, lawlessness and even banditry. Although humanitarian assistance is welcome, the lack of durable solutions for IDPs 14 months after the earthquake exacerbates a palpable sense of exclusion and dis-empowerment.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) donors have not delivered on their pledges. As attention is drawn to new crises around the world, recovery has in some measure stalled at the relief stage. International community achievements in stabilizing the situation and reconstruction progress have also been [poorly communicated](#) to intended beneficiaries. The potential for civil unrest and violence is real, and even during calm periods, humanitarian responders routinely rely on MINUSTAH peacekeepers and UNCIVPOL soldiers for crowd control during aid distributions. Haitians writ large lack confidence in the humanitarian response and mistrust the intentions of NGOs and international actors.

Donors, meanwhile, are concerned about [corruption and a lack of capacity](#) of local actors to deliver on projects, contributing to the slow pace of aid delivery and recovery. Although camps are starting to [empty](#) and the numbers of IDPs have decreased from 1.5 million to 690,000 (as of March 2011), many who left were forcibly evicted. Others departed because of insecurity, poor sanitation or concerns about the hurricane season. Finding durable housing solutions remains a challenge and there will most certainly remain 400,000 IDPs through 2011.

Context analysis

The literature is rich with descriptions of how large scale scheme to help countries recover from disaster in the last 100 years have often gone awry. All too often centrally managed social plans - such as the aid

¹ The Tumultuous History – From Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation by Philippe Girard Palgrave Macmillan 2005

effort in Haiti - run into the sands because they are insensitive to local customs and do not engage beneficiary populations. ²

Attempts to use communications to inform beneficiaries of humanitarian aid priorities, engage their feedback and promote behavior change typically fail. The most commonly reason cited is lack of stakeholder involvement. Despite lip service to “two way communication” most development and emergency actors pursue centrally controlled, one-way messaging rather than an open approach with a mechanism to listen to beneficiaries at its heart ([\(Development\) Communication: The Lubricant for Running the Development Engine Smoothly.](#))

Please also see: [The Haiti Tanbou Project](#); [Haitian Crisis Response Platform Moves Forward](#); [Aid monitoring by Haitians for Haitians](#); [Haitians Cry in Letters: ‘Please — Do Something!’](#); NPR [Text Messages, Radio Warn Haitians of Cholera](#); [Letters from a Broken Land](#), The Guardian 1 January 2011; [Overview of media coverage](#)

The Tanbou at work

The Tanbou complaints tracking mechanism is now being extended throughout Haiti to allow any citizen in Haiti to provide feedback on the implementation of internationally funded projects and to act as an anonymous whistleblower, in cases of corruption. This anti-corruption and civic engagement project is nationwide aid monitoring platform connecting beneficiaries with donors through an invisible “crowd-voicing” technology that already captures the opinions and complaints of the populations, whether urban, rural or indeed homeless.

The system seeks to bridge the need to empower all citizens to have a voice, regardless of their literacy or access to means of communication, with a reliable and transparent tracking system that will convey their input to an instance of a crowd-voice database and provide appropriate feedback to resolve problems.

Working in collaboration with IOM’s communications section, the Haiti Reconstruction Fund, has developed this Complaint Tracking Mechanism (CTM) specifically for the sort of high value projects it funds, using Haitian technical tools and know-how, which seeks to maximize the capacity building and sustainability effect.

There are three main components: a) complaints collection tools, 2) processing centre and tracking officer, and c) tracking and public information website. In terms of complaints tools, the CTM collects information through any means available to any citizen in Haiti: SMS, telephone, letters, e-mails or even drawings. The processing centre is an information and data gathering centre where operators, appropriately trained determine whether the complaints are valid and relevant to the fund, capturing as much information as possible and registering it in a database for effective tracking, verification, and two-way communication. The aggregate of these complaints are shown on a web site, so visitors can see the current state of the complaints, cataloged per project.

² Seeing Like a State by James C Scott, Yale University Press 1998

A national tracking officer collects the verified and well-documented complaints and communicates them to the relevant partner entities, for the first tier of action. They will respond within previously agreed periods or there is scope for further follow-up. The web site will show the final status of the aggregate of complaints, and if possible and warranted, information on specific complaints. The web site shows information at two levels, one for the general public, as described above, and tracking information only accessible via a password interface.

Getting Haitians involved

Haitians are eager to know why international aid has been so slow in coming to their communities and the population has already been sensitized to the need to combat corruption and low standards of construction via a daily radio program which is broadcast nationwide and an illustrated journal called *Chimen Lakay*.

Over the coming months a further 200 suggestion boxes will be installed throughout Haiti starting in April and completing by October 2011. Further engagement will be sought by advocating for direct civic involvement throughout the country at round table discussions with local communities, radio spots and the distribution of the *Chimen Lakay* newspaper devoted to fighting corruption as well as SMS, Twitter, websites and other means of transmitting information.

IOM will also use its national *Chimen Lakay* radio program to stimulate discussion about this citizen anti-corruption initiative and develop and broadcasting a short 10-minute radio “strategic soap-opera” named “Deskabes” to further seed the national conversation in Haiti with the need for ordinary people to take on the role of citizen/community journalists and become the guardians of aid and good governance in Haiti

A competition found in the illustrated journal measure messages retention and all this is advertised on a community based radio network of +60 independent stations and the nationwide RADIO-TELE Ginen network.

Local radio affiliates receive pre-recorded program content encouraging anti-corruption civic participation and solicit feedback for ongoing social auditing. The radio network is connected to the web platform www.citizenhaiti.org, which provides local journalists with access to local target populations (opinions, perceptions, concerns, demands). The end result is improved ability of Haitians to increase visibility of issues important to their communities as well as promote a national conversation through open-source technologies for constructive civic participation. IOM Haiti has had great success using these technologies and approaches in the *Tanbou Project*, including the ability to refine program implementation, mitigate conflict, highlight unsavory and corrupt behavior and improve program impact on an ongoing basis. IOM now seeks funds to refine and generate a package of interventions that can be applied to various sector programming for improved program implementation and impact.

Results

The first phase of the *Tanbou Project* has resulted in over 5,000 letters being received from beneficiaries who ended up in displacement camps after the 2010 earthquake. While these letters have been cathartic, it's also clear that the aid community has not taken the voice of those in camps seriously enough. And of course these letters represent a small sample of a population of some 1.5 million at the peak of the crisis.

Taking the project to the broader population to monitor aid and corruption is showing far more potential for success as there are deep concerns that aid to Haiti will be diverted, as has happened so often in the past. In a country that is for all intents and purposes a failed state, the only prospect for accountability is to engage the affected population directly as the eyes and ears of the reconstruction process.

Prezi of [The Tanbou Project](#)