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Defining a Niche for International Education as the Link to Building Global Civil Society

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As we witnessed the incredible surge of international donations and support directed toward Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake, we must recognize the fact that the momentum of support and influx of supplies, materials, money, and ultimately, the level of international interest, once strong in the weeks after the catastrophe, have waned as the afflicted country has shifted from our collective focus to the periphery of our attention and moral recall. This is a natural dynamic that is exacerbated by the initial bombardment of footage from the area by the media. Weeks and months after such a tragedy, we experience disaster fatigue and the perceived goodwill drawn from the many individual and collective efforts to aid Haiti metamorphose from inspiring to prosaic.

Even people who are working on the ground now to aid victims and help restore order there were aware of this onsite immediately after the earthquake. Torree Nelson, of Habitat for Humanity International, observed at the time, "We need to have staff for five to 10 years doing this work. And so we need to have staff that is committed, but we also need a support structure, and we need the public and others—donors and institutions that we work with—to recognize and stay committed for the long term and find ways for us to make that sustainable."[1] Nelson's remark is astute, but easily lost in the cacophony of chaos and good intentions. As the international effort and good will in response to international emergencies diminishes, there must be collaboration with the local populace to ensure that the work being performed now will continue long after volunteers, NGOs, and military personnel have departed.

Even shortly after the quake, some locals were expressing frustration concerning the authenticity of the international aid. During an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, Jean-Max Bellerive, the Haitian prime minister, commented, "I believe it's a

more pragmatic responsibility. I don't believe people are following moral responsibilities to help. They are going to help Haiti because it's cost effective."[2]

In his book *The Rise of Global Civil Society: Building Communities and Nations from the Bottom Up*, Don Eberly asks, "What can all actors in the developed world, public and private, do to partner more effectively with indigenous civil society in order to build upon the problem-solving capacity that exists in every locality?"[3] The answer, it appears, is to promote and integrate in our collective conscience the concept of civil society. The large number of NGOs and other voluntary organizations sometimes dilutes the effectiveness of disaster relief, community building, and other activities.

Long-term solutions are not possible if the people providing the aid and support do not have the proper approach to their work, or more importantly, to the people they are working with in the local communities. Charitable efforts are all but useless if the attitude of local empowerment is not reciprocally instilled in the people and organizations that claim to have the interests of the affected communities at heart. In fact, NGOs and other organizations may run the risk of prolonging existing obstacles to civil society such as poverty and democracy deficits. Noted development expert William Easterly once commented that "rich world activists prolong the true nightmare of poverty." The implication is clear: Good intentions without a sense of moral imagination, a solid understanding of the culture of the local community, and a commitment to extend efforts beyond the period covered by the media, can cause more harm than good. More than good intentions are needed to truly rebuild a nation or establish an invigorated ethic of citizenship.

Out of the decimation of disasters like the earthquake in Haiti, nations can reconstruct themselves in new fashion, but to do so it must be done in a collaborative spirit with those providing aid within a reasonable timeframe and most likely, outside the purview of television cameras and audio recorders.[4]

This niche can be filled by international educators. Ever since the field came under scrutiny following the revelation that one of the perpetrators involved in the attacks of September 11, 2001 entered the United States on a student visa, the discipline of international education has sought to demonstrate that its purpose falls in line with the expectations and regulations of the U.S. government. Reacting to the events and scrutiny

at the time, the discipline emphasized its role in contributing to U.S. national security by educating students about the world through abroad experiences. The profession has also adopted the mantra of "creating global citizens" in the hope of distancing the education abroad experience from the public misperception that this experience is merely another form of extracurricular activity in which students participate to "get away" from the campus or to touch up their resumes.

These efforts are understandable but lack a concept of what the profession can give back to the communities that host U.S. students. By working with NGOs and helping prepare their workers for international and cross-cultural experiences, international education can begin to make a more substantial contribution to civil society in many locations around the world. International education can ground its mission on the values that are important to making civil society successful. This is entirely plausible as NAFSA: Association of International Educators seeks to expand opportunities to study abroad for disciplines beyond the foreign languages and the humanities. By providing students with the tools to become better informed and acquainted with other countries and cultures, NAFSA can connect students specifically to the different 'forms' of the abroad experience (i.e., study, volunteer, internships, service learning, ESL, etc.).

Such diversification of international education is a good thing in itself, but tying it additionally to civil society would make the benefits of participation in abroad programs much more tangible and ultimately make NAFSA more credible and visible in the social sector and beyond. This is what we as international educators should aspire to.

It is important to stress that international education and other components of the social sector can make inroads where NGOs have encountered an impasse. By emphasizing its links to civil society, stressing the exchange component of international education, making it intentional and inclusive of members of the host countries, and illustrating the long-term local benefits of it, international education can separate itself from being seen as merely a pawn of 'the American Way,' a stereotype that has beleaguered many NGOs. It can provide NGO workers with the tools necessary to be successful in their work abroad. More importantly, it can instill in students what Carlo Filice has called the "Obligation to keep informed about distant atrocities."[5]

The idea of civil society is nebulous in and of itself and the roots of its ambiguity lie quite deep. Its notion is not new, but it has taken on so many forms and interpretations through the years that its chances of achieving acceptance outside the inner circle of its strongest advocates are weakened. The political scientist John Ehrenberg noted that, "Because its antecedents have not been adequately explored, civil society is often deployed in a thin, undertheorized, and confusing fashion."[6]

In some ways this gap in the emergent concept to civil society resembles the gap in the emergent concept of international education itself. The latter has struggled with the perception that it is solely a commodity for a select group of students that lacks a theoretical framework or clearly defined disciplinary vision to address the increasingly diverse population of students desiring to study abroad. Much work has been done in recent years to address this, however. The very ethos of international education, and its philosophical essence, should be to foment solidarity and to develop concepts of mutual aid between students and host countries. It is apparent that there is more than just a casual resonance between the conceptual travail of civil society and international education.[7]

The gaps in the concept of civil society may present international educators with the opportunity to fill them in by articulating the concept as a core value of the profession. International education comes close to reaching that goal in its promotion of its initiative, the "global workforce development."[8]

The tragedy in Haiti should make us think how the discipline of international education can work to make civil society a reality in other parts of the world while at the same time making it a core value for our students who study abroad and make "disaster fatigue" a thing of the past.

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[1] Quoted in Rafael Romo. "Responding to a crisis: The harsh realities for aid workers in Haiti." http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/01/29/haiti.relief.workers/index.html?hpt=C1. Accessed 30 January 2010.

[2] Bellerive, Jean-Max. 2010. Interview by Christiane Amanpour. *Amanpour*. CNN. 29 January.

[3] Don Eberly. *The Rise of Global Civil Society: Building Communities and Nations from the Bottom Up*. New York: Encounter Books. 2008. p. 291

[4] Economist Paul Collier makes this point quite clear: "Donors should be committed for the decade, not just the first couple of high-glamour years." See Paul Collier. The Bottom Billion: *Why the Poorest Countries*

Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It. Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 152. He also cites an interesting statistic: the time it takes a failed state to achieve decisive change is 59 years. (Collier, p.72).

[5] Carlo Filice. "On the Obligation to Keep Informed About Distant Atrocities." *Human Rights Quarterly* 12. 1990. pp. 397-414.

[6] John Ehrenberg. *Civil Society: the Critical History of an Idea*. New York: New York University Press. 1999. p. x. For another definition of civil society, see Jeffey J. Segall. "A First Ftep for Peaceful Cosmopolitan Democracy." *Peace Review*, vol. 9, n. 3 (1997)

[7] This speaks directly to the concept of governance conditionality outlined by economist Paul Collier as a "shift of power from governments to their citizens." Collier (2007).

[8] See Ron Moffat. "NAFSA's Role in Developing Global-Ready Graduates." http://www.nafsa.org/partners.sec/global_workforce_development/nafsa_s_role_in_developing/. Accessed 06 February 2010.