Out of the rubble: Haiti's long-term needs

by Paul Jeffrey in the March 23, 2010 issue

After having been buried for a week in the rubble of Haiti's January 12 earthquake, Ena Zizi was rescued by the Gophers. As they pulled her dirty and injured body out on a broken piece of plywood salvaged from the rubble and carefully passed her down over three stories of debris to the ground, the 70-year-old woman began singing. Her singing was inarticulate, as she hadn't had any water to drink for seven days. Yet her joy was infectious. The members of the Mexican rescue team who were carrying her began crying. In the shadow of the Roman Catholic cathedral, in this one small corner of Port-au-Prince's tortured and grieving landscape, other rescue team members from South Africa and Mexico stopped their digging for a moment and applauded.

Zizi, who was severely dehydrated and had suffered a broken leg and dislocated hip, told an interviewer that she had yelled for help in the hours after the quake, then conversed with a priest who was trapped in the rubble nearby. After two days he grew silent, so she "talked only to God." When the Mexicans' search dogs brought rescuers close, she sang until they found her.

The Mexicans who saved Zizi's life are known in their home country as Los Topos de Tlatelolco, or the Gophers of Tlatelolco. Tlatelolco was a giant apartment complex in Mexico City that was destroyed by earthquake in 1985. During that disaster, when the Mexican government failed to respond promptly, Tlatelolco residents formed their own rescue brigade and learned on the job. In the years since they have become stars among international rescue teams.

Unlike rescuers who stay on the surface and peel away the debris until they reach the victims, the Gophers have become world-renowned experts at gaining faster access to survivors by tunneling into rubble and propping up makeshift tunnels with debris. It means they put their lives more at risk, but that risk paid off for Ena Zizi.

The Gophers have a lot to teach us. We want to help the people of Haiti in their moment of crisis, but we're often scared of getting caught up in their complicated history and culture. Ena Zizi and others are calling on us to tunnel in.

Despite recent improvements in the country's economy and political culture, including an improved investment climate and reforms of the national police, the earthquake struck a country that is a poster child for vulnerability—Haiti's political, economic and social factors set it up to suffer more when it encounters inevitable natural hazards, in this case an earthquake. Any attempt to help Haiti recover in the long haul without attempting to understand that vulnerability will doom us to merely replicating that same condition; in other words, nothing will change.

We must dig deeper and tunnel like the Gophers into Haiti's past, much of which is inextricably linked to U.S. and European foreign policies and the behavior of U.S. corporations. We must dig into the rubble of Haiti's reality in order to craft responses that take advantage of the deep resilience of the Haitian people and empower them to shape Haiti's reconstruction themselves, rather than let it be shaped by the whims of well-meaning outsiders.

Thousands of people in our churches are going to Haiti as volunteers, and their solidarity will be critical in helping Haitians recover. Yet if all people do is rebuild the same Haiti—a country that is vulnerable in so many ways—people might as well stay home. Charity will do no good if it is not tempered with justice.

There are myriad challenges in Haiti that demand our discernment. To cite just one example, there is a move to reverse decades of urban migration that swelled Port-au-Prince into an unsustainable urban nightmare. Now the Haitian government wants to move people back to the countryside. It makes good sense, and tens of thousands of Haitians have already left the capital on their own. They will need housing in the countryside, and it's likely that volunteer mission teams will be called on to help with that construction. But even if they have shelter, how will they feed themselves?

Not long ago Haiti produced more rice than it consumed. Then in 1995 the International Monetary Fund forced Haiti to reduce tariffs that protected its domestic rice industry. Foreign companies, mostly from the U.S., started dumping rice in Haiti. Most Haitian rice farmers went broke and migrated to the capital. The international community must make a radical shift in Haiti's treatment, moving toward fairness and away from actions that were based on a historic revenge on Haiti for daring to

break with slavery and colonialism. If we don’t make this shift, schemes such as the relocation of families to the countryside are doomed to fail. If we don’t want to be accomplices in such wrong-headed adventures, we’ll have to respond comprehensively to the Haitian crisis—rebuilding crumbled infrastructure while at the same time remaking the international economic and political environment in which Haiti will have to survive. That means getting congregations as excited about canceling debt and challenging unfair trade as they are about packaging $5 hygiene kits.