The sit-in that blocked the road in front of the Ministry of Social Affairs on World Habitat Day was peaceful but noisy. “We are people not animals!” “Get us out of these pigeon cages!” chanted the mostly female crowd. All members of the Housing Rights Coalition, drawn from more than 30 IDP camps that are still home for the estimated 595,000 people still living in the mud of another Haitian rainy season, they insisted on being heard. “We’re fed up of living in tents!” proclaimed their banner.

Complaining that the continued construction of temporary housing was a waste of time, that a national plan for permanent housing should be developed by government not NGOs or donors, the crowd blocked entry through the Ministry’s metal gate until a letter outlining their demands had been delivered. “What’s happening now is totally unacceptable,” said economist Camille Chalmers. “We need a national social housing plan under the Ministry of Social Affairs,” insisted another leader, Antonal Mortimé.

The demands in the letter reiterated those raised in a meeting with the Haitian Senate’s Sub-Committee for Social Affairs on September 6. They include:

- **A Senate Housing Committee:** The creation of a Senate committee on housing with camp residents providing regular evidence and expertise
- **Committed Funding:** That parliament pass legislation assigning dedicated funds on an annual basis for a substantive social housing programme
- **Housing Office:** The revitalization of the public housing authority, (the Entreprise Publique de Promotion des Logements Sociaux or EPPLS), the agency charged with planning, building and administering social housing
- **Parliamentary Investigation:** A detailed accounting of how the huge reconstruction sums already assigned to housing are being spent
- **National Housing Plan:** That the Haitian State take effective control of reconstruction and housing by consulting on and agreeing a National Housing Plan to which all private donors and NGOs must conform.

These key demands strike at the core of what has gone wrong to date. One, a lack of prioritization of popular, social housing post-earthquake; two, a lack of consultation and inclusion of the homeless themselves in any planning; three, lack of government control of housing funds and plans; four, the absence of a national housing plan as the basis for reconstruction; five, the effective privatization of what house building there is by foreign NGOs. All that has added up to one thing: a lack of results. The facts are stark. To date the only real housing program has
n July 28, 2011, an eighteen-year-old Haitian youth was gang raped in the small southern town of Port-Salut by UN peacekeepers. He was in the maternity ward of the national public hospital in Haiti (MINUSTAH). The assault was filmed on a cell phone. The president of Uruguay, José Mujica apologized, calling it “so slap in the face.”

The case was brought to the attention of the world on August 18, 2010, as a group of NGOs asked for an investigation. The assault had been found hanged in a MINUSTAH compound in the northern city of Cap-Haitien. Despite eye-witness accounts and medical evidence suggesting he was murdered, the body was exhumed and released.

The issue is from being aberrations, the burgeoning, sexual exploitation and rape of Haitians by MINUSTAH forces have actually become the norm.

In one instance, in November 2007, Sri Lankan soldiers were sent out, under orders to exterminate those considered the “worst criminals.” MINUSTAH prime function was to supress “popular and anti-market economy political forces” she asserted. Some international human rights groups knew exactly who those criminals were – including hundreds of women and children – “neutralised” by the de facto regime that succeeded President Aristide in partnership with MINUSTAH.

On more than one occasion, but most notoriously in the July 2005 assault on Cité Soleil, MINUSTAH deployed armour and helicopter gunships in punitive raids against the occupants of infamous slum blocks – the ultimate, quite literally, in overkill. Such operations are not cheap, but Ambassador Sanderson regarded it as a “fantastic and regional security bargain for the US.”

A mere 4,596 permanent homes have been built since the earthquake, against nearly 2.281 million homes that were claimed. “It’s almost like we’re in a war zone,” laments the occupation expert Franck Dupont. But if its legitimacy is, at the very least, shaky, its purpose could not be clearer. The ostensible justification for MINUSTAH is to protect Haitians from themselves – the line being that, were heavily armed troops in full battle gear and armoured personnel carriers not patrolling the streets, Haiti would degenerate into a criminal underworld worse than the streets.

Yet it soon became clear that MINUSTAH’s overriding mission was not peace but politics, that it’s breadth-brash definition of “armed” and armed forces has been sympathetic to Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas party. That meant predominantly the poor, and, in particular, the poorest of the poor living in shanty town communities like Bel Air. Martin and Cité Soleil.

In essence, MINUSTAH was not in Haiti to protect Haitians but to protect the socio-economic status quo, a status quo already reinforced by the quarter of the electoral electorate.

In a cable dated October 1, 2008 published by WikiLeaks, US Ambassador to Haiti Terence Roach was quite clear. MINUSTAH’s prime function was to suppress “popular and anti-market economy political forces” she asserted. Some international human rights groups knew exactly who those criminals were – including hundreds of women and children – “neutralised” by the de facto regime that succeeded President Aristide in partnership with MINUSTAH.

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As the disease spread, reaching the capital and crossing the border into the Dominican Republic, so did the anger at the UN’s refusal to mount a serious investigation into the issue of the outbreak. At one point, thousands of Haitians protested in Cap-Haïtien in November 2010, MINUSTAH troops fired on protesters, killing three and wounding scores. A year on, two scientific studies have provided incontrovertible evidence that the Nepalese soldiers were the source of the outbreak. The UN, however, refuses to accept responsibility, let alone liable.

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So what about the consultation and community involvement so prominent in Martelly’s blueprint? For many in Stade Silvio Cator this amounted to nothing more than violence and threats. Some 35% of the former residents surveyed reported being physically harmed or threatened during what was simply a forced eviction by local authorities. Some 30% of residents reported destruction of their shelter or belongings in the process.

The Alternative: Public, People, Both

Obviously all this does not bode well—and not just for those in the six camps named, who are actually the chosen few. They number a fraction of the estimated 595,000 still living in more than 900 IDP camps. Housing them or anyone else has, of course, never been a priority. Even though the value of housing lost in the earthquake was put at more than 30% of total losses, the Haitian government’s request for funding for housing was only ever 8% of its total reconstruction budget proposal to donors.

Even Martelly’s plan, ostensibly central-government controlled, does not do the logical thing—channel plans, projects, and procedures through the government’s public housing authority, the EPPLS, the preferred option of the Housing Rights Coalition. It could build permanent social housing as it has done in the past, would be accountable to Haitians, could collect rents, and, as such, could leverage the hundreds of millions of donor dollars now being disbursed to develop a sizeable and sustainable social housing stock.

But while the IHRC has approved $270m for housing projects, the EPPLS has, like so much else in the Haitian government, been completely bypassed, despite the oft-repeated donor mantra that the reconstruction must be Haitian government led and build public capacity in the process. The EPPLS has actually been effectively killed by the earthquake.

Its two officials died in their office and its minuscule budget has been effectively eliminated, a victim of the lack of budget support to the Haitian government in the first year after the earthquake.

The fact that the government did not even have a ministry for housing and urban development before the earthquake accounts for the state of Port-au-Prince when the ground started shaking. The fact that Haitians are still without such a ministerial authority today—five agencies that share some responsibilities related to housing now meet in an interministerial committee, according to the Housing Rights Coalition—an accounts for the lack of coordinated effort to take control from the donors and the NGOs.

One alternative leads back to where it should all have started: the people. Although cash handouts after disasters are not a panacea, the absence of anything else for so many may make them the obvious best option in Haiti. NGOs put the price of a T-shelter at anything between $1500 and $5000 per unit. Those towards the top end of that range are effectively permanent or convertible-permanent homes.

However, convincing if anecdotal research shows that Haitians are individually building homes to the same specifications as the T-shelters at less than 20% of the NGOs’ costs. Most of the difference is not going into the Haitian economy. Could the aid dollar, pound or Euro go five times as far in Haitian hands? If so, as seems logical, it would mean more homes, more jobs, more cash in the local economy. The flip side is equally obvious: fewer IDPs, less gender-based violence, less cholera in fewer IDP camps. Win-win.

Perhaps everyone, government, NGOs, IHRC, should go back to where they should have started: consulting the homeless, trusting the people, mobilizing the energy and enterprise of ordinary Haitians who are endlessly active whichever way you look in Port-au-Prince. All it requires is the allocation of micro lots of land to kick-start the process. Set aside land, wherever, and they will come, as the one camp on government expropriated land at Corail Cesselesse proves (see Haiti Briefing 66). Is that so much to ask?

The Haiti Support Group (HSG) seeks to amplify the voice of progressive civil society organisations in Haiti to politicians, the press and the public in Europe and North America.

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