

Petty trade and the private sector in urban reconstruction: learning from Haiti's post-earthquake Iron Market

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Abstract

Port-au-Prince's iconic Iron Market was reopened the day before the first anniversary of the 2010 earthquake that destroyed the economic and historic heart of Haiti's capital city. This chapter, based on research undertaken by the author in 2011, highlights the importance and the challenges of directing reconstruction interventions towards rebuilding commerce, improving work environments and involving the private sector. The chapter concludes with a discussion of implications drawn from the research and an identification of lessons for humanitarian agencies and governments with regard to post disaster urban reconstruction.

Introduction

Following the devastating 2010 earthquake that affected Haiti and in particular its urban areas, the recovery has been particularly challenging for stakeholders involved in the reconstruction. Despite large investments and good intentions of many actors, the fact that several years later many displacement camps remained open with large numbers of people still unable to return home serves as a reminder of the complexities of urban recovery.

Building on experiences in Haiti and elsewhere, such as in the Philippines following 2013's Typhoon Haiyan, the humanitarian community largely acknowledges that approaches to post-disaster reconstruction need to be rethought in order to address the complexity of urban environments; for example, statements emerging from consultation platforms of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) address this issue. They relate to the urban context of intervention stating, for instance, that 'the humanitarian response needs to ... build on coping and support mechanisms of communities ... (and) take into account local economic mechanisms' (WHS, 2015b). Other statements refer to improving technical and logistical levels of intervention that such urban context requires by supporting and developing the involvement of the private sector's 'experience, skills and resources... (and) explor(ing) ways of channelling their expertise, resources and innovative approaches' (WHS, 2015a).

In Haiti, specialist reports following the earthquake have also suggested taking advantage of the way urban citizens have accessed resources and developed their livelihoods (Clermont et al 2011; Kyazze et al 2012; Fan 2012; see also Schaeffer Brown 2015). Spatially, this primarily applies to the numerous street markets, public markets and small shops that give character and vibrancy to the urban spaces of Haitian cities (Sanderson and Knox Clarke, 2012; Sokpoh et al, 2014; Kyazze et al, 2012). Such places for many constitute the most popular and useful livelihood spaces of the city, in short places where livings can be made.

Public markets involve more than petty trade transactions. They are important urban places. The Declaration of the 9th International Public Markets Conference in 2015 asserts that 'unlike other forms of commercial enterprise, public markets... add great value to the economic, social, physical, and environmental health of the communities they serve' (PPS, 2015). They constitute unique and appropriate space of intervention as 'the daily commercial exchange that forms the heart of public market systems ... offers powerful opportunities for transforming cities and regions across the globe into thriving, sustainable, and socially cohesive places' (PPS, 2015).

<FIGURE 10.1 HERE>

Figure 1: On the central place of the market. Source: Smith, 2011

The reconstruction of the Iron Market after the earthquake received widespread attention. Of particular interest is how the reconstruction related to both global discussions about urban humanitarian contexts and the involvement of the private sector in post-disaster reconstruction. The international press, built environment journals and a few expert reports often refer to the Iron Market project – called ‘Marché en fer, marché Hyppolite or marché Vallière’ in French – as a successful project (Forbes, 2011; Galilee, 2011; Davis, 2012; Mone, 2011). Their appreciation generally comes from the appropriateness of a project that both uses and promotes economic, social and cultural elements, a post-disaster approach that embraces the urban context.

The reopening ceremony of the market, which took place on January 11, 2011, the eve of the first anniversary of the earthquake, received extensive coverage locally and globally (see for example Forbes, 2011; Mone, 2011; Duval, 2011). In contrast with many projects around the city, its reconstruction was not financed and managed by international aid but rather privately financed by the owner of Digicel, a large mobile phone company in Haiti. To these ends the project has also been promoted as an example of what private enterprises are capable of achieving in urban post-disaster recovery.

A short history of the Iron Market

<FIGURE 10.2 HERE>

Figure 2: The Iron Market in 1907. Source: photo uncredited in book by Jacques Nicolas Léger – Haiti: Her Histor neighborhood y and Her Detractors, P.248

Since Haiti’s independence from France in 1804 the present site of the Iron Market, occupying a central location in the ‘Bord-de-mer’ neighborhood, the historical commercial heart of the capital city of Port-au-Prince, has been occupied by a vibrant market (ISPAN, 2010c). The neighborhood was filled with traders and merchants, along with their warehouses and outlets (ISPAN, 2010a). The informal markets on covered sidewalks (known as galleries-trottoirs) have developed and expanded considerably in the last decades, building links of dependency between the area’s formal and informal traders and transforming the area into one of the most dynamic commercial locations of the city.

<FIGURE 10.3 HERE>

Figure 3: Sketches of the Iron Market’s main façade and floor plan. Source: Adapted from JM+P, 2011 and Smith, 2011

Petty trade on this particular site was formalized in 1890 by the Hyppolite Government which instigated the construction of a cast iron structure fabricated in Paris. The market is organised into the South Hall, dedicated to food trade, and the North Hall, reserved for commerce of arts and crafts and voodoo objects. These two sections stand on either side of a central public place, enhanced by a grand entrance with minarets that gives the Market both charm and monumentality. The popularity of the Iron Market reached its peak in the decades of the 1940-1960s benefiting from the development of tourism at that time (ISPAN, 2010c). Its distinct architecture and cultural and economic significance has made the Iron Market a ‘city emblem’ (ISPAN, 2011); the market is also represented on local currency, appearing on the 1000-gourde note since 1999.

<FIGURE 10.4 HERE>

Figure 4: Colorful informal markets occupying the streets surrounding the Iron Market (under reconstruction). Source: the author

A fire in 2008 destroyed the North Hall and therefore terminated the trade of cultural items at the Market. All but completely destroyed by the 2010 earthquake, the Market was rebuilt due to the personal financial contribution and determination of Denis O'Brien, the owner and Chief of Digicel, the dominant mobile company in Haiti (Reitman, 2011). The reconstruction being assured, a presidential decree confirmed the Iron Market as a National Heritage Building in May 2010 (Dieudonné, 2010).

<FIGURE 10.5 HERE>

Figure 5: In front of the Iron Market. Source: Smith, 2011

<FIGURE 10.6 HERE>

Figure 6: Formalized stands typical of the four main sectors: food, hair and cosmetics, botanica and arts & crafts. Source: Smith, 2011

Prioritising the rebuilding of commerce

The reconstruction of the Iron Market has been seen as one of a few projects that focus on the economy (da Silva cited in Davis, 2012; Forbes, 2011) with the intention of responding to the high demand for employment (Vulliamy, 2011). Rebuilding infrastructure dedicated to commerce makes economic sense: Haitian city dwellers rely on local markets (distinguished here as commercial activity rather than the physical structure) to access goods and services and meet their basic needs (Sanderson and Knox Clarke 2012; Sokpoh et al 2014), underlining that, 'cash and markets are essential to urban livelihoods' (Kyazze et al, 2012, 25). This view is illustrated by one vendor from the arts and crafts hall, who in interview said, 'When you build a market, I like that. You build jobs. I lost my job when it burnt' (Smith, 2011, 56).

Commerce of course is not new: while city dwellers take part in the complex, vibrant and fragmented Haitian economy (Bailey, 2014) seeking formal jobs or offering goods and services in local markets (Fan, 2012), statistics show how challenging it is to successfully make a living in Haiti's local economy. Eighty percent of Haitians live in poverty, more than 40 percent are unemployed and more than two-thirds rely on the informal economy (Clermont et al, 2011; CIA, 2014). Every need has a price and thus it is not surprising that earning cash through petty trade or employment is a primary activity among Haitian city dwellers.

Another way to understand the importance of access to livelihoods and local markets is the urban poor's prioritisation of proximity to livelihood opportunities even if that means worse housing conditions and neighborhood services (Fan, 2012) and lack of access to credit due to an absence of land title (Sherwood et al, 2014).

Of course, rebuilding a single commercial place after disaster does not necessary mean successfully rebuilding commerce. In the case of the Iron Market the short-term impact on the local economy seems limited. Merchants face constant and important economic difficulties (St Juste, 2013). Two years after the earthquake, working at the Iron Market was not yet profitable for all vendors. The most obvious reason may be that customers remained scarce. This might be related to the kind and variety of products vendors are (to a certain extent) limited to sell, which might not match with what buyers demand or can afford. To illustrate, arts and crafts products may essentially be dedicated to the tourist market, which still has a long way to go before being vibrant (Nagle Myers, 2015; Thomson, 2014; Nelson, 2014). This precarious situation beyond the physical structure itself has inevitably had an impact on vendors' livelihoods, leading to reduced household income.

<FIGURE 10.7 HERE>

Figure 7: A clearer division of the physical space raises vendors' social assets. Source: Smith, 2011

Moreover, while the majority of the interviewees¹ appreciate the practical advantages of renting a stall at the Market, such as adequately protecting the merchandise from weather conditions and thieves, being able to store goods in-place during the night and accessing water and waste services, they consider the renting price too high for the little profit they make. 'I'm satisfied but it's too expensive', said a female vendor in the botanica section. In other words the price may be seen fair for the services they get, but vendors struggle to pay the rent. 'We are afraid of being expelled' stated a female vendor in the food section, scared of the long term consequence this might imply.

As a result many vendors rely on informal or formal support such as micro-credit schemes and, more importantly according to them, on social solidarity (i.e. loaning and borrowing) to be able to pay weekly rents. These friendships based on proximity in the Market are a vital source of help. For many, solidarity appears to be more important than competition among vendors as a means of survival. One group of women in the market's food section said that they were constantly helping each other financially. Even this may, however, not be enough in the long term; as one interviewee stated, 'Everyone is on the verge of bankruptcy. We can no longer help each other here'.

In order to improve the economic situation of the Market, the city centre (the former economic hub of the country) needs other economically focused projects to tackle root causes of its economic decline. The city centre of Port-au-Prince used to be an important place for business but had started to deteriorate before the earthquake struck (Noel, 2013), which then damaged the city centre to such an extent that the vast majority of remaining formal vendors – known as 'les grands magasins et entrepôts' – moved to the suburbs, reshaping the economic map of the capital city (Sherwood et al, 2014; Noel, 2013). With the loss of formal and bigger businesses, the centre of Port-au-Prince is (for now at least) deprived of its economic power of attraction that informal vendors bootstrap.

To this day, the development prospects of the city centre are unclear. While urban planners, entrepreneurs and politicians agree on the importance of regenerating the city centre, formal reconstruction there is slower than in other parts of the city. Formal merchants wishing to rebuild the commercial city say their initiatives are 'repressed' by land title issues, mortgage loan problems and lack of security needed to protect their investment (Alphonse, 2014; Noel, 2013). Additionally, plans to rebuild this part of the city are tied to political agendas: expropriation and urban plans significantly change over the years in terms of size and content due to pressure of different groups of interests, different political visions and previous irregularities being revealed and addressed (Noel, 2013). Notwithstanding these challenges, demolition of remaining buildings within a selected dedicated zone is underway and investments are expected to take place in the near future if the political will remains stable. It is hoped that in the long term the return of public administration will create a 'critical mass' to lead to the recovery of the city centre (Dumas, 2014).

Improving work environments

Surprisingly perhaps, while vendors at the Iron Market make a low income, they do stay to benefit from the relatively good working conditions. This contrasts with the surrounding crowded streets, perceived to yield more profit but where vendors work in very difficult and unsecure environments: 'people sell more on the streets but here we feel secure', said a female vendor in the food section. The Iron Market vendors benefit from a safe, spacious, clean and comfortable working environment which also offers access to water and to controversial but much needed pay-per-use restroom facilities. The environment reduces health and violence threats and thus provides significant positive impacts other than financial ones. More than a decent communal space, the reconstructed Iron Market also provides an improvement through defining vendors' personal space. Under the Market's roofs, retail space is equally and clearly divided between vendors which

improves subsequently the quality of relationships within the vendor community, ‘We have more space; so less problems. We are not stuck. Everyone has his own space’, confirmed a vendor working in the North Hall. While the competition for commercial space had caused conflicting situations in the past, an equal distribution of the space now has helped vendors maintain good relations with their colleagues and thus improved their useful social assets. A crucial level of solidarity takes place and helps vendors to sustain themselves throughout constant difficult economic times, for instance as noted earlier securing rental payments by redistributing individual earnings. The social atmosphere is thus much better now than it used to be. As one vendor noted, ‘All the vendors, we are a family’. Vendors in the Market on the whole liked the new environment, ‘It is very pleasant here. We are well,’ noted a female vendor in the food section. ‘Look at this! It’s a palace! I own a palace!’ said an arts and crafts male vendor.

<FIGURE 10.8 HERE>

Figure 8: Street market next to the Iron Market. Source: Smith, 2011

Informal markets next to the Iron Market

It is important to note that the working conditions and the strong sense of belonging is limited to the users of the Iron Market, mostly the market vendors themselves, and does not appear to extend to the neighbouring street community. The difficult working conditions in the streets, described as ‘inhuman’ by many street vendors, persist. The neighbouring street vendors feel they have not really benefited from the Market’s reconstruction. ‘It’s not for us, it’s for them,’ expressed a neighbouring female vendor. Nevertheless she and her neighbouring counterparts working in the street markets insisted on the significance of and the aspiration for such an exemplary environment.

While much of the aid community focus internationally for post-disaster urban reconstruction tends to be on domestic living conditions, the Iron Market project highlights the importance of considering working conditions and their potential for recovery. Indeed, the scope of urban recovery should be enlarged to consider a more complete and realistic urban way of living, moving from a rural or suburban vision of living conditions towards including more central or strategic working spaces. Most of the cash-based livelihood activities occur outside the homes, at street markets or more formal places. Too often unconsidered within the Haitian recovery discourse – they have been rarely mentioned in recent reports – these urban spaces form a vital part of urban life that have a ‘particularly large bearing on living conditions’ (Gehl, 2010, 217). Considering work environments is also a way of understanding the need to address various urban forms of living, a need highlighted in one specialist report drawing lessons on urban post-disaster relief and recovery (Sanderson and Knox Clarke, 2012). The Iron Market is a powerful example of the centrality of working conditions not only to achieve a dignified and healthy life but also to develop personal and community assets.

<FIGURE 10.9 HERE>

Figure 9: The governance structure as perceived. Source: Smith, 2011

Learning from the private sector in urban disaster recovery

In addition to the urban physical and economic work context, the case of the Iron Market also demonstrates the crucial role the private sector can play as a driver of post-disaster reconstruction projects that offer much needed jobs and adequate working environments. While the slow pace of the reconstruction in Haiti has been criticised in local and international press and in independent expert reports (Reitman, 2011; Granitz, 2014; Olivier, 2014; Clermont et al, 2011), there may be subsidiary lessons to learn from the private sector’s engagement in Haiti.

The business sector has been seen as a significant player given its contribution to constructing structures that enhance economic development (Reitman, 2011; W J Clinton Foundation, 2011). The Iron Market project shows the private sector could bring considerable financial investments into reconstruction and recovery as well as management and technical expertise. In this way, entrepreneurs can and should be seen as important actors in providing jobs and work environments, especially in urban environments. Without its US\$12 million contribution, it is unlikely that the Iron Market would have been rebuilt.

The private sector brings more than money to the table, offering technical expertise especially important given the complexity of post-disaster urban environments. The private sector can use its expertise in subcontracting work to planning, architecture and engineering professionals and using experienced entrepreneurs (Sanderson and Knox Clarke, 2012). In the case of the Iron Market, although the strategy raises other questions, the development company outsourced many of the most significant construction tasks to external international companies such as for hiring professionals and for building the new prefabricated structure, preferring a high level of efficiency of the construction process over investing more (in the short term at least) in the local economy. While the project used locally available expertise (for example masonry, restoration work and supervision), the strict schedule imposed by the donor may have limited much needed long-term development and financial support of a local construction industry.

Large successful private companies could also be helpful in implementing human resources and management structures that could strengthen the Market in the long term. With the Iron Market, Digicel committed to finance, manage and maintain the Market for the immediate future (Duval, 2011). While some might critique the corporate model of private sector actors engaging in philanthropic 'do-gooding' (for instance see Sontag, 2012 and Lazare, 2013) the Iron Market indicates that there can be some positive outcomes.

<FIGURE 10.10 HERE>

Figure 10: A socio-spatial segregation. Source: Smith, 2011

The Market's governance structure has also directly and positively impacted vendors. The efforts to clarify and formalize the spatial distribution of commercial space that contributes to a better social atmosphere have also pursued in implementing a new management structure (see Figure 10). On one hand it gives vendors an opportunity to be represented by elected members who address relevant issues with the Market managers (perceived as the mobile company) and on the other hand allows the managers to efficiently govern the Market, for example to collect rent payments. This structure has significantly increased workers' levels of influence on decisions that affect them such that the apparent privatization of the Iron Market has not necessarily reduced the power of the vendors. Indeed this is even more evident when contrasted with the level of influence the neighbouring street vendors have on improving their working conditions. Democratic representation alongside an equal distribution of commercial space has helped prevent unfair arrangements and potential conflicts that could have darkened the image of the Market.

The Market vendors' sense of belonging is strongly associated with the work and social environment they enjoy from renting a stall at the Market. They use the physical and managerial structures in their best interests and improve their assets. More precisely though the involvement of the vendor community is in fact restricted to the commercial space. It is also important not to overstate the level of participation. The management structure described above is limited to commercial activities and does not seem to provide involvement in other 'meaningful' activities' other than the 'necessary' ones, such as cultural events and social gatherings for passers-by and local vendors (see Gehl, 1996 in Carmona et al, 2010).

<FIGURE 10.11 HERE>

Figure 11: The physical setting of one special event in 2011, at the central place. Source: Smith, 2011

The central part of the Iron Market however, which is also the most architecturally significant section, is often used for special occasions. Still the events, some visible in national and international media, that have taken place at the Market (for example the opening ceremony and the President's tribute to Haitian artists) have been organised for dignitaries, politicians and philanthropists without really involving the local working community. Many vendors, from the Iron Market and the neighbouring workers were prevented from attending. Remembering the event, one vendor stated, 'All the gates were closed', while another lamented she was 'not invited'. Those who were selected and present at the events were kept aside, 'It wasn't fair; it was a party for Haitian artists and guests. It was for the honour of the president. It was not for us', expressed another vendor from the North Hall.

<FIGURE 10.12 HERE>

Figure 12: One of the two Digicel stands inside the Market. Source: Smith, 2011

This situation consequently creates a division between the commercial space designated for local vendors and the symbolic space that serves the political or marketing purposes of the elite, showing a problematic side to the philanthropic implications of private businesses in rebuilding previously collective infrastructures, 'Are you talking about the marché Digicel (Digicel Market)?' asked one vendor in the neighbouring streets, literally making the link. The symbolic image of the Market's reconstruction has thus been implicitly claimed by those who contributed to its reconstruction, transforming people's image of the place. This effect illustrates a potentially negative aspect when state-owned infrastructures are rebuilt by and in the interests of the investors. It suggests that greater attention be paid to how vendors themselves might be included professionally and symbolically in such public events that could further improve their sense of belonging to the Market (Gehl, 2010).

Towards new approaches in urban reconstruction and recovery

The reconstruction of the Iron Market by Digicel demonstrates that a private sector company can be a powerful actor in reconstruction, strengthening the economy and impacting working environments. Increasing collaboration between the private sector, humanitarian organisations and governments in order to scale up and better tackle the urban post-disaster recovery offers opportunities for more effective responses for the next urban disaster. To be sure, as discussed above, the dangers of privatisation need to be understood, specified and addressed lest the benefits be lessened.

Notwithstanding potential benefits, the local private sector, and especially that part of it dealing with non-housing concerns, continues to be largely ignored by aid responses in urban disaster recovery. The private economic sector is rarely mentioned in humanitarian reports (see for instance Sokpoh et al, 2014). After the Haiti earthquake only 0.1% of the approximately US\$2.4 billion donor funding was directed towards Haitian businesses and NGOs, while the overwhelming amount went to international organizations (such as UN agencies and international NGOs), international enterprises and donors' civil and military entities. While these statistics do not tell the whole story (cash grants and vouchers for instance given by agencies contributed to the saving and recovery of Haitian small businesses), the relative lack of private sector involvement in such large influxes of funds has probably led to missed opportunities for using humanitarian aid as investments in recovery.

How then can this be improved? One way to increase private investments in the local economy is to build more collaboration between international agencies and local enterprises. Sarah Bailey, independent consultant and research associate at the UK's Overseas Development Institute (ODI), highlights this point in her report on the role of the private sector in Haiti, 'The role of the private sector in humanitarian response tends to be a divisive topic amongst international humanitarian actors. On the one hand, the private sector is held up as offering a way of improving efficiency and promoting innovation; on the other, it is seen as a bastion of profiteering that runs counter to the humanitarian mission. International humanitarian actors often view the private sector only in its role as a supplier of goods and services and as a source of donations

through philanthropy and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Moving beyond stereotypes and developing a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of engagement between businesses and humanitarian agencies is necessary in order to take advantage of potential opportunities, and to support the markets and businesses people rely on for their livelihoods' (Bailey, 2014, 3).

Even though such collaborations are more the exception than the rule in Haiti, some have been successfully implemented. An example is cash transfer programming, involving NGOs, banks and mobile phone companies. These enterprises had 'strong commercial incentive' in implementing these channels while the NGOs needed 'safe, accountable and wide-reaching' distribution systems (Bailey, 2014). The cash directed toward people in need has then been spent in local markets. This example does not involve supporting local economic markets directly and building back better infrastructures, but it is nonetheless a partnership that has been reported successful in improving livelihoods and shelter conditions (Bailey, 2014; Sokpoh et al, 2014; Condor et al, 2013; Clermont et al, 2011). Furthermore several NGOs such as Oxfam International have started to develop and increase their engagement with the local private sector (Bailey, 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that working with the private sector and within Haiti's economic market is complex. A few formal players control almost half of the economy and numerous informal enterprises participate in this vibrant but under-regulated sector, where corruption is endemic (Sokpoh et al, 2014). While increasing collaboration between the private sector, NGOs and local government might be an innovative way to address 'how' post-disaster urban recovery could be improved, petty trade and marketplaces in particular should also be part of 'what' to support and rebuild. These markets in Haiti, as in many poorer countries, house one of the main existing livelihood activities of urban citizens. In fact, markets seem extremely resilient in the aftermath of a disaster: Port-au-Prince's street markets were operational a few days after the earthquake despite extensive loss and damage (Clermont et al, 2011). Existing markets could form a strong economic basis upon which to build.

For now, the Iron Market stands as an exception of an economic infrastructure being rebuilt, physically and symbolically standing alone in the devastated neighborhood. Despite its positive social and well-being impact on the vendor community, the new Iron Market does not at least for now play its past role of an economic hub. More research is therefore needed to fully understand how to support local petty trade and to rebuild economic infrastructures for strong local impact. As the declaration of the 9th International Public Markets Conference adopted in March 2015 states, 'Today, despite their long history and numerous benefits, public markets face serious challenges due to insufficient recognition in policy, research, and funding. Many cities do not have appropriate policies or resources to invest in basic maintenance and sanitation, to expand or create new markets, or to manage public spaces effectively to integrate market activity' (PPS, 2015).

Conclusion

The case of the Iron Market should be seen as a learning ground for those involved in post-disaster urban recovery to build back better. Approaches to reconstruction by diverse agencies and organizations in these particular contexts should move towards a better consideration of the local economy that actually rule day-to-day the lives of urban citizens. The Market's inclusion of workers in governance is an important further lesson in thinking through how private aims can be partially harmonized with worker aims.

Numerous issues associated with post-disaster reconstruction have not been considered in this chapter, but four main lessons may be gleaned from this particular project. The first is the directing of reconstruction efforts towards rebuilding the local economy and developing employment as a top priority. The second is that work environments and conditions should also be considered in actions aiming to improve living conditions. Thirdly, aid spending should be seen as investments and be made in collaboration with the local private sector (Sanderson and Knox Clarke, 2012). Finally, merging humanitarian and entrepreneurial approaches to reconstruction provides better opportunities for urban recovery, especially if each actor's interests are recognized and respected, and if local working communities have the opportunity to grow and remain part of their city's destiny. Perhaps markets are truly good places to start rebuilding after urban disaster.

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ⁱ 28 women and three men were interviewed in the Iron Market and one man and 8 women in the street markets nearby