

Whose fault? Port-au-Prince, Haiti

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Syllabus links, Stage 4: Interconnection: natural hazards and the liveability of places

Outcomes: GE4-1; GE4-2; GE4-3; GE4-4; GE4-6

Key inquiry questions: How are people and places connected to other places?

What are the consequences of a globally connected world for people and places?

If you look to the right-hand side of the photo below, you'll see a fault line from this aerial photo over Haiti. You can probably see how the land is being pushed or squeezed up – a convergence zone.



Have you ever had to leave your home, because of damage or threats from bushfires, floods, cyclones or storms? Or crime or riots? What options did you have? Who was there to help you and how? If you've never had to evacuate your home, you might need to use your imagination. Even if you have had to evacuate, you might still need your imagination to help you understand the situation for some people in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Picture yourself...

No, I'm not asking you to take a selfie. Imagine that you were born on 12 January 2005, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. It's now 2018 and you're 13 years old. You can't remember the earthquake very well, and you can't remember anything about the time before the 'quake. It happened just before 5 o'clock in the evening. You were at your parents' shop. You can remember the violent shaking. The adults had felt minor earth tremors before, but nothing like this. It was scary to see how terrified the adults were. You can remember the crying and screaming, the building crumbling, the noise and the dust, and everything going dark. Your dad was out shopping for goods to sell in the store, and was uninjured. You woke up two days later on the floor of a hospital – there weren't enough beds. A day later, your mother had still not been located, and was declared dead. The following day, her body was pulled from the rubble. Her body was bruised and covered in blood – but she was alive! She was also severely dehydrated, and had some broken bones, but had no life-threatening injuries. Fortunately – this might not sound fortunate – she probably went into shock when the earthquake occurred, slowing down her vital functions, and allowing her to survive longer; the body's survival mechanism. You're not sure whether to thank The Catholic saints – maybe Saint Martin, after whom you were named? - or the voodoo spirits, for keeping her alive. All that happened on your fifth birthday. Now, every year, your birthday is a sad day for Port-au-Prince, as people commemorate the earthquake.

You ended up with a scar on your forehead from the earthquake, but some of your friends think that's pretty cool, thanks to a famous movie and book character. Your mother has since fully recovered, except that she walks with a limp. And the 'shop' is now about two kilometres from where you live, in a tent city (on an old golf course). There is no shop anymore. Your parents continue to sell

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clothes outside the front of your old shop building. You went to school off and on for a few years after the earthquake, but you're now old enough to guard the shop when your parents have to be away. You can read basic texts. You speak Haitian Creole (or Kreyòl) fluently. You can also understand quite a bit of Spanish, Portuguese and English, as there are many words from these and other languages in Creole. You're good at understanding languages, and are often asked to translate if a customer doesn't speak Creole.

Night time is the scariest. Sometimes you have to guard the shop after dark, against adults, sometimes armed, and much bigger than you, and sometimes in gangs. In your tent at home, there is little protection from theft, and you keep anything valuable inside your clothes. You sleep with a knife under your 'pillow' (which is a bunch of your clothes). You still

remember the morning you woke up and the knife was gone. All you knew was that someone had got into the tent while you and your parents were asleep, and had taken your knife. Fortunately, they hadn't hurt you or your parents. Among the family's most useful possessions are their two phones. But finding somewhere to charge the battery is always difficult. Your cousins Marie and André live not far up the hill in Pétiyon Ville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince. Their house wasn't badly damaged. Marie and André go to a local school, and want to go to university. It seems so unfair. Still, your uncle and aunt, even though they're poor, have helped as much as they can, and let your family live with them for a while – but their house was too small for eight people as the kids got older.

Imagine, if someone from the United States or Australia told you 'this is all your fault,' how might you respond?

Activity 1

Discuss with a partner how you think Martin, above, might respond. There are some prompting questions at the end of this unit, in Appendix 1, but think of your own responses first. Martin is a made-up person. You can read an account of some survivors of the earthquake at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/11/haiti-rape-earthquake-mac-mcclelland/> but be warned, parts of the account might be upsetting.

Activity 2

Have a look at the map of Haiti and the region below. Why might Haiti be strategically important, and to whom?

The map doesn't give away many clues. Here are some hints to start your thinking:

The division of the island of Hispaniola into Haiti and Dominican Republic (a reminder of colonization).

Prior to the development of trains, in the first half of the 1800s, long-distance travel was mainly by water (oceans, seas and navigable rivers). The names the Windward Islands, and the Leeward Islands, give hints of this sailing history.

Pirates.; Minerals. (Christopher Columbus noticed that the native Taíno wore gold jewellery.; Slavery; Trade.



Source: <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/namerica/caribb/ht.htm>

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Activity 3

Below is a very brief timeline of some significant events in Haiti's history. Think about how some of them show who 'wanted a piece of' Haiti, and why, and how Haiti's location has affected its history.

600 CE – First humans, Taíno 'Indians', arrive in present-day Haiti, from South America (the Orinoco delta – present-day Venezuela). They named the land Ayiti (land of the high mountains). Their society was organised as hereditary chiefdoms.

1492 – the night of 24/25 December, Christopher Columbus's ship, the *Santa María*, runs aground at Cap- (Cape) Haïtien (northern Haiti, see map). He used materials from the shipwreck to make a fort, which he called Navidad (Christmas). Columbus claimed Hispaniola (the island made up by Haiti and Dominican Republic) for Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Columbus was looking for a westward trade route with 'The Indies' (Asia), hence the names The West Indies, and Indians, for North American native peoples.

1492–1518 – Known as the Taíno Genocide. It is estimated that about 85% of Taíno were already dead when smallpox broke out in 1518, which killed an estimated 90% of the remainder.

1660 – The English, concerned that Pirates had taken over Tortuga (Turtle) Island, put a Frenchman, Jérémie (note the town name in southern Haiti, on the map above) Deschamps, in charge, under condition that he looked after British interests. Deschamps claimed the island for King Louis XIV of France! (Turtle Island is shown as Île de la Tortue on the map above, just north of the mainland.)

1664 – The French West India Company is set up to 'run' Haiti (which they called Sainte Domingue).

1697 – The Treaty of Ryswick 'gives' the western third of Hispaniola to France, and the rest to Spain.

1749 – Port-au-Prince established. It was named after a ship, Le Prince. (I'm not sure which, if any, Prince, the ship was named after.)

1751 – An earthquake destroys most buildings in Port-au-Prince.

1700s – Sainte Domingue became France's richest colony, known as 'The Pearl of the Antilles' (Antilles, the French term for 'The West Indies' probably means 'the isles on the opposite side' – perhaps of the ocean, or of

the (known) world). The main exports were the cash crops coffee and sugar. During this time, Haiti was central to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By the 1780s, there were more than 750 000 slaves in Haiti, ruled over by about 32 000 whites.

1756–1763 – Britain, and France, and their allies, fight the Seven Years' War – a war that spread globally.

1770 – Earthquake and tsunami in Port-au-Prince kill 300, and another 30 000 later, from famine and disease.

1789 – French Revolution; Declaration of the Rights of [sic] Man.

1790s – First and only ever successful slave uprising/ revolution, led largely by Toussaint ('Allsaint') Louverture, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, against France's Napoleon Bonaparte. (The US Civil War, which led to the liberation of slaves there, did not occur until 1861–65.)

1804 – Haiti declares independence from France.

1821 – Santo Domingo declares independence from Spain.

1842 – Major earthquake in Cap-Haïtien. Much of the 1800s was characterised by political instability, coups and political assassinations.

1915 – (During World War I) the USA invades Haiti, and occupies it until 1931. The invasion was mainly because Haitian banks owed American banks large sums of money, but the period of occupation also saw some democratic reforms and infrastructure development. The Great Depression decimated the value of Haitian exports.

1957–1986 – Dictatorship under the Duvaliers – François 'Papa Doc' and his son Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc'. They ruled in part by the use of a security force, known colloquially as Tonton Macoute 'Uncle Hessian Bag' – named after a mythical character that takes away naughty children in his hessian bag.

1964 – Hurricane Cleo. > 130 deaths.

1990 – First popularly elected President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who rules by force.

1991 – Military coup against Aristide.

1994–1995 – US-led military intervention overturns the coup. Aristide reinstated.

2004 – Aristide resigns/is overthrown in a (US-initiated?) military coup?

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2008 – Haiti impacted by four hurricanes (the term used in the North Atlantic and Caribbean for what we call tropical cyclones in Australia): Fay, Gustav, Hannah and Ike (note the alphabetical order and alternate gender names). Deforested hillsides led to severe flooding and mudslides. > 360 deaths.

2010 – 12 January, 4:53 pm. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake hits Port-au-Prince, mainly affecting the downtown (Central Business District) area, largely because the CBD is built on sandy soil, as opposed to the hillside suburbs, on more solid rocky soil. The earthquake killed an estimated 300 000 people. Most buildings were not earthquake-resistant. There had not been a severe earthquake in Port-au-Prince since 1770, that is, 240 years.

2012 – Hurricane Sandy. > 50 deaths.

2016 – Hurricane Matthew. > 500 deaths.

2018 – 11 January (the eve of the eighth anniversary of the 2010 earthquake) US President Donald Trump is reported to have made disparaging (insulting) comments about Haiti and its people.

Below is a picture of Haiti's Parliament building before and after the earthquake in 2010. http://a.abcnews.com/images/Technology/ht_haiti_ba_9_100115_ssh.jpg You can also watch some dramatic footage of the building during the earthquake at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiE0gxImOTM> The ruins have now all been cleared away. A time lapse of this process can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoxNMttTAEc>



Activity 4

	Haiti	Australia
Population	10 647 000 approx.	
Area	27 750 sq km (It would fit into Tasmania almost 20 times)	
Population density		
Capital	Port-au-Prince	
Main exports	clothes, manufactures, oils, cocoa, mangoes, coffee	
Unemployment	40%	
Life expectancy	64.2 years	
Infant mortality	47 deaths per 1000 live births	
Highest point	Chaîne de la Selle (the Saddle) 2,680	
Main religions	Catholic (55%) (official) Protestant (29%) Voodoo (2%) (official)	

Main source: CIA, 2018

About 95% of Haiti's population is of African heritage, which explains a great deal about the extent of the slave trade. Very few people of Taino descent remain. Statistics are difficult to find.

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Look at the image of the Haitian flag. This one has the centerpiece enlarged, to show more detail. It is based on the French flag, minus the white stripe. Find out about some of the flag's symbolism and history. <http://www.newspapercountry.com/Haiti.png>



The Haitian currency is called the gourde. Can you find out why? What can you tell about Haiti from looking at this 250 gourde note (featuring Jean-Jacques Dessalines – see timeline), below?

Activity 5

Looking at the photos of Port-au-Prince, below, and Martin's story, above, brainstorm what you believe to be the most urgent problems facing Port-au-Prince. Then discuss possible ways of responding to these problems. Try and devise up to five major response strategies. Determine what you think might be the costs, and the equipment, including personnel and expertise, needed. Who would you consult for advice? There are also some observations by the author at the end of this unit.



The Cathedral was among the buildings destroyed in Port-au-Prince.



In both pictures above, you can see that shopkeepers have 'set up shop' outside the ruins of their condemned buildings.

Activity 6

Draw up two lists, as below, and think of three or four (or more) items for each list – see timeline.

Benefits of US interventions in Haiti	Drawbacks of US interventions in Haiti

Activity 7

'Australia has no moral obligation to help the people of Port-au-Prince.' Discuss.



Children in Pétion Ville, suburban Port-au-Prince, getting their shoes shined before school.

Activity 8

To think about: 'Haiti's slave uprising/revolution in the 1790s was inspirational and influential, if not instrumental, in the abolition of slavery in the USA (1861-65) and the world. That is Haiti's gift of civilisation to the world. The world has an obligation to help Haiti in its time of need.'

Provocation: Is there anything you are a slave to? (maybe your phone or other gadgets, or clothes, or accessories, hobbies or (watching) sport, or ...?) Could

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you devote a bit of the money or time you usually spend on those instead to help other people, in Haiti or elsewhere, as a gesture of solidarity and action against slavery? Maybe organise something at your school.

Appendix 1

Prompts for Martin's story

- Think of the heading in this unit – ‘whose fault?’
- If locals (including Martin's cousins) haven't helped, why should we?
- Should rich countries in the area, e.g. the USA and Canada, provide most of the aid? Should Australia look after its own region instead?
- Should France and the French-speaking world, bear some responsibility?
- Should the Catholic Church help?
- Maybe all of the above, and others?
- How might helping be an *investment*? How might it help Martin to get a better education (remember, he's good with languages, so would probably be fairly good at school, given the opportunity)? Might that then help Martin and his family to earn more money, and pay more taxes, to raise their own standard of living, and that of all Haitians?

Appendix 2

Author's observations on downtown Port-au-Prince, January 2018

I've travelled widely, and it takes a lot to shock me these days. But nothing prepared me for downtown Port-au-Prince. Some of the images are much more stark than the ones included here. My experience adds a whole new meaning to the word 'aftershock'. Eight years after the earthquake, little seems to have been done to help the commercial enterprises of Port-au-Prince. Government buildings are being rebuilt, but the commercial area appears much as it must have just after the 'quake. Given that the area affected is relatively small, a budget for repairs would be also relatively small, in international aid terms. A local observer commented: "For you to address the housing problem in Haiti, you also have to address all of the other problems in Haiti — employment, investments, education. All have to run parallel" (Charles, 2015).

And yet, progress is being made, even if too slowly. The Guardian (2014) reported that, "according to the IOM [International Organisation for Migration], 171,974 people – down from 1.5 million – were living in ... lean-tos [makeshift tents]".

One possible response that occurred to me, was, if not to reconstruct the shops as they were, with more earthquake-resistant buildings, might be to construct covered marketplaces, with stalls inside. (Think Paddy's Markets in Sydney, or Victoria Markets in Melbourne.) Given that the weather is never cold in Port-au-Prince, the buildings would not need solid walls of brick or similar. Some form of sealing the building would be necessary in the event of hurricanes, though. This would allow commerce to take place in a safe and dignified manner, and under protection from the hot tropical sun and heavy tropical rains. This would also permit commerce, the profits of which would be taxed by the government, and/or the government could lease the stalls to shopkeepers at a nominal rate, also generating government income. Here's an image of such a structure already in Port-au-Prince.



Once Port-au-Prince returns to a safer state of commerce, cruise ships might be more likely to dock there, further boosting commerce. Cruise lines might like to adopt the term 'New Port-au-Prince' to attract travellers.

Educating the world about Haiti is crucial to its recovery. Someone might like to dramatise in novel or film form, the Haitian slave uprising. Surely this would resonate with people worldwide. Any novelists or film directors out there? Some of the profits might be devoted to



Cap Haïtien, Haiti. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Port-au-Prince repair works. Many individuals and corporations have already made a good deal of profit from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. Some existing profits might be devoted to the repair works?

Final thoughts: Thinking back to Martin's story, above, it seems that a generation of children has grown up/ is growing up in central Port-au-Prince, who have experienced anarchy and poverty as *normal*. Hopefully it's not too late to rescue this generation of children from becoming angry, bitter and perhaps violent adults, thereby perpetuating the system. Repairing the infrastructure might be a relatively straightforward way of creating 'a better kind of normal'. I'm appropriating an old slogan for a laxative product in using that expression. I'll resist the urge to make a reference to US President Donald Trump's alleged comments about Haiti.

Part of the response needs to be political. Perhaps urge local and other politicians to keep Haiti in mind in terms of international development aid.

If you donate money to an organisation, such as World Vision, The Red Cross or UNICEF (there are many others as well), you might like to specify that the money goes to Haiti.

At least two days appear to have been set aside in the cause of abolition of slavery: 10 October and 2 December. Perhaps use these days to raise awareness of Haiti's circumstances and history.

Maybe support Haiti by travelling there one day. Hopefully, by the time you're old enough to travel independently, Port-au-Prince might be in better shape. Even if you don't visit Port-au-Prince, you could travel, perhaps on a cruise liner, to Cap Haïtien, which is undamaged and beautiful.

RIGHT: Cap-Haitien, Haiti (Feb. 2, 2010) Red Cross volunteers carry an evacuated patient from a helicopter. Source: Wikimedia Commons

References, further reading

Note: Many of these make for depressing reading. The most positive is probably the Guardian report.

Antillean Media Group (2015). Are Haiti's tent cities being forgotten? Retrieved from <https://www.antillean.org/are-haitis-tent-cities-being-forgotten-125/>

Charles, J. (2015). Tens of thousands still living in tents 5 years after earthquake. Miami Herald. Retrieved from <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article6005817.html> Journalists and newspapers such as the Miami Herald are to be congratulated for continuing to report on the situation in Port-au-Prince.

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Photos: Collection of the author unless otherwise specified.

