Published on *Ciencia Puerto Rico* (https://www.cienciapr.org)

Science for the reconstruction and prosperity of Haiti [1]

Submitted on 4 December 2011 - 6:14pm

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e-ciencia.com [3] By Mónica I. Feliú Mójer / Ciencia Puerto Rico The January 12th, 2010 earthquake caused unprecedented devastation to Haiti's infrastructure and to the country's social, educational, economic, and environmental institutions. Two years after the disaster, Haiti now transitions into its long-term reconstruction. With this purpose, the government of Haiti—as well as humanitarian and international agencies—have drafted plans and reports that provide road maps for the recovery, progress, and prosperity of the Republic of Haiti after the earthquake. However, a very limited number of these documents consider the importance that science and science education could and should have in Haiti's future. With this in mind the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)—with the leadership of its Caribbean Division—convened scientists and educators from Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, international scientists, and public policy experts to develop the report titled Science for Haiti. Science for Haiti lays out a series of strategic objectives and action recommendations to help promote science and scientific education in Haiti. Among these strategic goals are increasing scientific literacy, tying the advancement of Haitian science to the fulfillment of the country's needs, and developing the

capacity and expertise of scientists in Haiti. Also, the report underscores the need for the establishment of a national public policy on science and governmental support to the advancement of scientific capacity and the development of higher education and research institutions. Challenges and opportunities Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The earthquake destroyed much of the country's already feeble educational, economic, and administrative infrastructure. Moreover, the earthquake worsened an existant humanitarian crisis in this impoverished nation. In the face of such monumental challenges, why should science be a priority for Haiti? Scientific knowledge is key to the progress of any country. In particular, the advancement of science, technology and innovation in Haiti could provide much needed solutions to some of their most pressing issues. For example, science and technology could improve health care and clean water access in Haiti, a country where 2% of the population is infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and where a third of the population lacks access to potable water. Engineering and earth sciences could greatly assist in preparedness for and mitigation of natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes. Through the development of sustainable agricultural and natural resource management practices, science could help reduce malnutrition and hunger in Haiti. Necessary for the advancement of Haiti's scientific capacity is the advancement of the country's scientific education. For science, technology, and innovation to become driving forces in Haiti's recovery and progress, it is crucial that every level of the Haitian society understands their importance and applications. Moreover, effort towards increased scientific literacy in Haiti could be a vehicle to improve access to education for all Haitians; currently, about half of the Haitian population is illiterate. Last but not least, the advancement of Haitian science provides a vehicle to protect fundamental human rights such as the right to education; access to clean water, food and housing; the right to health; and the right to the protection of life during natural disasters. Key for the reconstruction, sustainable progress, and scientific prosperity of Haiti is that these efforts are led by the Haitian people and supported by the regional and international communities. Initiatives aimed at training Haitian educators and scientists, including a recently established partnership between the University of Puerto Rico and the State University of Haiti, and a recent meeting that brought together several stakeholders from the government, education, and non-profit sectors interested in supporting the advancement of science in Haiti, are examples of the type of collaborations that can help science in Haiti move forward. Haiti's ordeal offers a warning of the devastation that can be inflicted on a country's infrastructure and institutions by a natural disaster of great proportions. It highlights the need for emergency management and mitigation plans that are based on the natural reality of the country (i.e. geology or geography); the importance of participative education for emergency preparedness and to empower the population to take part in the decisions for a sustainable development and future; and last, but not least, the existence of a national integrated and interoperable information system. Unquestionably, Haiti faces many challenges. However, it is not the only country that would turn to science to aid their recovery after a catastrophe. For example, following the Genocide of 1994, Rwanda made science, technology and innovation key ingredients for their long-term economic and social development plans. Science for Haiti is helping spearhead the efforts to advance science and science education in Haiti, and it is encouraging to see that some of the strategic goals and action recommendations made by the report are already being implemented. Recently, in response to one of the report's strategic goals—to support existing scientific and educational organizations and institutions, and if needed, establish new ones to promote the role of science in Haitian society—the Haitian Association for the Advancement of Science and Technology (HAAST) was established. Finally, the report Science for Haiti creates a unique chance for Haitians to enjoy their right to benefit from scientific

progress and its applications; to significantly improve their quality of life; and to achieve sustainable economic and social development. At the same time, the international community must look in Haiti’s mirror and learn their lessons. It is time to offer a helping hand to this Caribbean nation to aid them in moving towards a better and more just future for their inhabitants.

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