







## The Right to Housing in Haiti

With housing still inadequate more than 6 months after the earthquake, Haiti is witnessing the seeds of a people's movement to demand the human right to housing.

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by Colette Lespinasse with Beverly Bell  
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*Colette Lespinasse is director of the Support Group for the Repatriated and Refugees (GARR, by its French acronym) in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Here are her thoughts on solutions to the crisis in which 1.9 million homeless people are still living in precarious tents and other makeshift structures, six months after the earthquake and almost two months into hurricane season. Colette talks both about the need for the government to guarantee the human right to housing, and how grassroots organizations can create homes in livable communities.*

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Colette Lespinasse says "It's possible to confront the housing problem if there is political will, if there is mobilization, if there is solidarity."

Photo by Beverly Bell.

We hear that in the camps there are groups who have started organizing themselves to assert their demands around housing as a right. They're thinking about alternatives and starting to put pressure on the government to respect those rights.

The first thing to do is some education so more people understand that [housing is a right](#). Second is to help people organize to demand these rights from the state. We need a popular movement to mobilize around the question of housing. I think the work that lies before us in the next year is to organize these different groups into a larger movement in Haiti—because the government isn't talking about it at all. But a great mobilization of people would make the government prioritize this.

I don't think there's a country in this world that can lift itself up if the people themselves don't mobilize first. We saw this after the earthquake: The group who did the most, who responded and mobilized, was the Haitian people. And they did it without any leaders. Today, the leaders of the state haven't yet called upon the Haitian people, either within the country or in the diaspora. And that's the greatest resource we have. That's where the leaders could find solutions for many problems that exist today.

The situation displaced people are living in, especially in Port-au-Prince and other cities that were touched by the earthquake, is unacceptable.

There have been a bunch of [international donor] conferences—at least four—that have been held about Haiti, but the real conference needs to happen here with the people, with all [the grassroots sectors](#): peasant farmers, people from the shantytowns, etc. The government could say, "Look at these problems we have, we can do this, we can't do this." And the people could say, "This is what we can do."

This would let us have consensus amongst ourselves.

## **A Right to Housing**

People need somewhere to stay out of the rain so they don't get sick; so they don't get wet; so they can sleep at night. That's their right. It's the same as having the right to eat: People need to eat or they'll die.

This right was already violated in Haiti before the earthquake. When you look at the kinds of houses we had—they're why so many people died during the earthquake. But that right has been violated even further since the earthquake. The situation displaced people are living in, especially in Port-au-Prince and other cities that were touched by the earthquake, is unacceptable. These are not conditions in which anyone should live, like living in the mud after it rains, on top of each other, under a bunch of tents where air doesn't circulate. There are people in camps right near us who've died; they've had a heart attack in the night where they couldn't breathe. Also, the police have been kicking people out from under tents in order to make them go live under [a new set of] tents.

Right now, there's no social protection for people who've lost all their means, who don't have purchasing power anymore. Nor for those people who have become more vulnerable, such as children—there are a lot of children who have lost their parents. Nor for people who've become handicapped. There are a lot of people who can't work anymore, who've lost a limb, and they're relying on others now.



### [Solidarity as Economic System](#)

After the earthquake, sharing communities are proving more shock-proof than market-based ones. Hunger is a big problem, too, since they cut off all the food distribution after March 31. As far as

potable water goes, there has been a bit of an effort, so people can find a little water to drink—even though they've announced they're going to cut that off, too, that people will [have to buy water](#) from now on.

We can also tell you that we've recorded many cases of violence, especially violence against women, like men beating their wives and cases of sexual abuse in the camps.

There are camps that have 60,000 people, 70,000 people. That's a town. The police have to organize themselves somehow to watch over these communities, but they're nowhere visible. People are complaining that they never see the state authorities visiting the camps.

We need a special program of protection so that those people can live. The government bears primary responsibility because the Haitian people depend on them, and they need to safeguard the rights of their people. The others—the U.N., other international organizations—they can come give support, but they can't take the place of the state. Sometimes we wonder if the government really exists. You don't see it, you don't hear its voice, you don't see it in action.

At the international level, there are funds that would allow people to find housing without spending a lot of money on interest. For all the money the international community claims they have for Haiti—for all [those promises of funds](#)—they ought to invest it in housing.

## **A People's Movement**

We in GARR are looking for partners from other countries, like community organizations in the Dominican Republic and other parts of Latin America who have put pressure on their own leaders to fix these problems. We're learning about the experiences of organizations in other countries, the solutions they've found for housing.

Mutual aid housing isn't just housing. It's the creation of communities, because we need houses *plus* the means to live.

For example, there's an international movement called Desalojos Zero (Zero Evictions). It says that the government doesn't have the right to evict people, to throw people out of a place if they have nowhere else to live. The same movement promotes people getting homes because that's their right.

[Beyond what the government and international community should do,] we at GARR want to pursue something called mutual aid housing. It's [cooperative aid](#), where the very poor pool their money together and pull their internal resources together to resolve their own problems. The Haitian government could also get foreign funds to put land at the disposal of homeless people. Families could contribute to building their houses; they could find financial support to buy building materials so they could begin to rebuild, doing cooperative construction with their own labor. The state could give them means—either low-interest credit, or giving people access to international funds.

Mutual aid housing isn't just housing. It's the creation of communities, because we need houses *plus* the means to live. People would have services like education and health, and [the means to start small businesses](#). We've seen places where people have done this and everything is cooperative. People come together to create schools and kindergartens—and you end up with a village in which people support one another in order to live. That's the idea we'd like to promote.

In Puerto Rico there's a group that does cultural activities, and they've already raised \$30,000. With \$30,000, we could build three or four houses to serve as a model. We could expand this, with the Haitian diaspora and with solidarity organizations, to show that it's possible to confront the housing problem. That is, if there is political will, if there is mobilization, if there is [solidarity](#).



### [A Future for Agriculture, A Future for Haiti](#)

Haiti's way forward is tied to food sovereignty and a renewed focus on local agriculture.

And another thing: There are people who want to make their knowledge available to this movement. We've found a retired professor in Puerto Rico who goes into communities and helps people create construction plans. Universities here could become part of this movement, helping communities with their knowledge so we wouldn't have to pay a bunch of engineers. We could pay two or three specialized builders, and then with the strength of the people we could purchase materials to help solve the housing problem.

Also, people could put the brakes on what we don't want—like [speculation](#) around housing. We hear there are a lot of big foreign companies who want to come build houses because Haiti has become a huge market. We propose that those mutual aid houses, residents couldn't engage in speculation with these mutual aid houses.

I hope that organizations that are in solidarity with the Haitian people will begin to mobilize more. People in Haiti can't take this anymore. We're hoping for ongoing support from everyone who supported us just after the earthquake. There must be a movement to place more pressure on the U.N., to ask them what they are going to do here, because they have great responsibility for what is going to happen. Everyone: Please continue to follow what happens here in Haiti, because now is when we need you most.



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Beverly Bell has worked with Haitian social movements for over 30 years. She authored the book [Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance](#). She coordinates [Other Worlds](#), which promotes social and economic alternatives, and is associate fellow of the [Institute for Policy Studies](#).

#### Interested?

- [Read more](#) from Beverly Bell's blog from Haiti.
- [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)  
In 1948, the world agreed on rights—including the right to housing—that belong to everyone. This Magna Carta for humanity sets a high bar that few governments clear.
- [People Without Homes, Homes Without People](#)  
In New York City, low-income people fighting for affordable housing are taking on the developers of vacant condo projects.

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