

Haiti's right to remedy and health-an urgent call to action



Susan A. Bartels,^{a*} and Sandra C. Wisner^b

^aDepartments of Emergency Medicine and Public Health Sciences, Kingston Health Sciences Centre, Queen's University, 76 Stuart Street, Kingston, ON K7L 2V7, Canada

^bInstitute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, Marshfield, MA, USA

Since the United Nations (UN) peacekeepers introduced *Vibrio cholera* into Haiti's most extensive water source in October 2010, confirmed cholera infections have claimed ~10,000 lives and infected over 820,000 individuals.¹ The spread of cholera and the severity of the epidemic were exacerbated by a lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems in Haiti with particular vulnerability among rural communities that rely heavily on open, unprotected water sources.²

In addition to its health effects, cholera has significant socio-economic impacts, with a 2019 study identifying an independent relationship between cholera and household food insecurity in Haiti.³ These findings underscore the concomitant impacts of the cholera epidemic on physical health *and* socio-economic wellbeing.

A 2017 study detailed the fear, chaos, and disruption caused by cholera in the lives of individual community members in Haiti.⁴ Study participants described the challenges faced trying to access life-saving medical care from an overwhelmed health care system still recovering from the destruction of the January 2010 earthquake. Entire families were deprived of whatever financial security they previously had when breadwinners died or lost their livelihoods due to cholera.

Six years after introducing cholera, the UN ultimately bowed to public pressure in 2016 and apologized to the Haitian people. In doing so, the UN promised \$200 million towards cholera elimination and improved WASH infrastructure, in addition to \$200 million towards material assistance for cholera-affected families. However, the UN's promise remains largely unfulfilled, even as its own [independent human rights experts](#) collectively call for the UN to uphold victims' internationally recognized rights to an effective remedy.

The 2017 research also revealed that an ongoing lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation compounded Haitian frustration around cholera and the

UN's handling of the epidemic.⁴ The proportion of the population with access to potable water decreased from 62% to 52% between 1990 and 2015. Furthermore, in 2020, only about one-third of Haitians had access to basic sanitation.⁵ This lack of progress towards improving WASH is especially perplexing considering the millions of dollars in aid, development, and re-building pledged to Haiti in the last decade.

Haiti's Ministry of Health and its partners have made much progress to end cholera transmission. In fact, with no laboratory-confirmed cholera cases in Haiti since February 2019,⁴ the UN may soon declare Haiti cholera-free if there are no additional reported cholera cases. There is controversy about whether cholera is about to be eliminated or whether it is simply underreported due to poor surveillance systems.⁶ Either way, eliminating cholera in Haiti does not remove the need for the UN to provide meaningful reparations for the loss and devastation suffered, and the UN is urged to prioritize providing cholera victims with the 'material assistance' committed to them over five years ago.

Eleven years after the introduction of cholera, those harmed by the epidemic are worse off in the absence of effective remedy that is rightfully due to them. Cholera-affected individuals and families have been forced to navigate steadily deteriorating socio-economic conditions at a significant disadvantage.⁷ In the past year alone, Haiti has faced rising gang violence and insecurity, a presidential assassination, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, a severe fuel crisis, and recurrent waves of SARS-CoV-2. In November 2021, Save the Children warned that water shortages due to limited fuel supplies following the August 2021 earthquake were contributing to an increased risk of cholera re-emerging in the country.⁸ Notably, a resurgence of cholera similarly occurred in Haiti following Hurricane Matthew in 2016.⁹ It is a salient example of how structural violence¹⁰ forces communities into poverty and how failed policies and lack of accountability perpetuate suffering and socio-economic instability.

Given the UN's lack of engagement and transparency around cholera in Haiti over the past decade, there is cause for concern that the UN will not compensate Haitian families affected by cholera. However, because cholera has been brought under control and may be

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Abbreviations: WASH, water, sanitation and hygiene; UN, United Nations

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: susan.bartels@queensu.ca (S.A. Bartels).

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declared eliminated by the UN, *now* is the time to help break the cycle of structural violence in Haiti, including providing remedies for earlier harms caused by the UN. This requires renewed commitment at the level of the UN and financial support from member states to assist cholera-affected families. Through the sustainable development goals, states have committed to 'leaving no one behind,' so we call on the UN to recognize the right to remedy and the right to health for families affected by cholera in Haiti.

Contributors

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Declaration of interests

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