The sit-in that blocked the road in front of the Ministry of Social Affairs on World Habitat Day was peaceful but noisy. “We are people not animals!” “Get us out of these pigeon cages!” “Public housing authority now!” chanted the mostly female crowd. All members of the Housing Rights Coalition, drawn from more than 30 IDP camps that are still home for the estimated 595,000 people still living in the mud of another Haitian rainy season, they insisted on being heard. “We’re fed up of living in tents!” proclaimed their banner.

Complaining that the continued construction of temporary housing was a waste of time, that a national plan for permanent housing should be developed by government not NGOs or donors, the crowd blocked entry through the Ministry’s metal gate until a letter outlining their demands had been delivered. “What’s happening now is totally unacceptable,” said economist Camille Chalmers. “We need a national social housing plan under the Ministry of Social Affairs,” insisted another leader, Antonal Mortime.

The demands in the letter reiterated those raised in a meeting with the Haitian Senate’s Sub-Committee for Social Affairs on September 6. They include:

- **A Senate Housing Committee:** The creation of a Senate committee on housing with camp residents providing regular evidence and expertise
- **Committed Funding:** That parliament pass legislation assigning dedicated funds on an annual basis for a substantive social housing programme
- **Housing Office:** The revitalization of the public housing authority, (the Entreprise Publique de Promotion des Logements Sociaux or EPPLS), the agency charged with planning, building and administering social housing
- **Parliamentary Investigation:** A detailed accounting of how the huge reconstruction sums already assigned to housing are being spent
- **National Housing Plan:** That the Haitian State take effective control of reconstruction and housing by consulting on and agreeing a National Housing Plan to which all private donors and NGOs must conform.

These key demands strike at the core of what has gone wrong to date. One, a lack of prioritization of popular, social housing post-earthquake; two, a lack of consultation and inclusion of the homeless themselves in any planning; three, lack of government control of housing funds and plans; four, the absence of a national housing plan as the basis for reconstruction; five, the effective privatization of what house building there is by foreign NGOs. All that has added up to one thing: a lack of results.

The facts are stark. To date the only real housing program has

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**“We’re fed up of living in tents!”**

**Nou Bouke Viv Anba Tant**

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“*We are people not animals!*” Women living in IDP camps protest outside the Ministry of Social Affairs, on World Habitat Day, October 3. “We call on the NGOs to stop building transitional shelters and invest that money in a government-run social housing programme,” says Reyneld Sanon, co-ordinator of FRAKKA, the leading Haitian housing rights coalition.

**Photo Credit:** Alexis Ekert, Otherworlds, www.otherworldsarepossible.org

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**www.haitisupportgroup.org**

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As the disease spread, reaching the capital and crossing the border into the Dominican Republic, so did the anger at the UN’s refusal to mount a serious investigation into the issue of the outbreak. At one point, thousands of protesters in Cap-Haitien in November 2010, MINUSTAH troops fired on protesters, killing three and wounding scores. A year on, two scientific studies have provided incontrovertible evidence that the Nepalese soldiers were the source of the outbreak. The UN, however, still refuses to accept responsibility, let alone liability

Be that as it may, the renewal of the MINUSTAH mandate was a forgone conclusion. With all those “reconstruction” contracts to protect and new assembly plants in the Free Trade Zones to police, Washington and its allies will need MINUSTAH for a while yet.
So what about the consultation and community involvement so prominent in Martelly’s blueprint? For many in Stade Silvio Cator this amounted to nothing more than violence and threats. Some 35% of the former residents surveyed reported being physically harmed or threatened during what was simply a forced eviction by local authorities. Some 30% of residents reported destruction of their shelter or belongings in the process.

**The Alternative: Public, People, Both**

Obviously all this does not bode well – and not just for those in the six camps named, who are actually the chosen few. They number a fraction of the estimated 595,000 still living in the more than 900 IDP camps. Housing them or anyone else has, of course, never been a priority. Even though the value of housing lost in the earthquake was put at more than 30% of total losses, the Haitian government’s request for funding for housing was only ever 8% of its total reconstruction budget proposal to donors.

Even Martelly’s plan, ostensibly central-government controlled, does not do the logical thing – channel plans, projects, and procedures through the government’s public housing authority, the EPPLS, the preferred option of the Housing Rights Coalition. It could build permanent social housing as it has done in the past, would be accountable to Haitians, could collect rents, and, as such, could leverage the hundreds of millions of donor dollars now being disbursed to develop a sizeable and sustainable social housing stock.

But while the IHRC has approved $270m for housing projects, the EPPLS has, like so much else in the Haitian government, been completely bypassed, despite the oft-repeated donor mantra that the reconstruction must be Haitian government led and build public capacity in the process. The EPPLS has actually been effectively killed by the earthquake.

Its two officials died in their office and its minuscule budget has been effectively eliminated, a victim of the lack of budget support to the Haitian government in the first year after the earthquake.

The fact that the government did not even have a ministry for housing and urban development before the earthquake accounts for the state of Port-au-Prince when the ground started shaking. The fact that Haitians are still without such a ministerial authority today – five agencies that share some responsibilities related to housing now meet in an inter-ministerial committee, according to the Housing Rights Coalition – accounts for the lack of coordinated effort to take control from the donors and the NGOs. One alternative leads back to where it should all have started: the people. Although cash handouts after disasters are not a panacea, the absence of anything else for so many may make them the obvious best option in Haiti. NGOs have put the price of a T-shelter at anything between $1500 and $5000 per unit. Those towards the top end of that range are effectively permanent or convertibly-permanent homes.

However, convincing if anecdotal re-search shows that Haitians are individually building homes to the same specifications as the T-shelters at less than 20% of the NGO's costs. Most of the difference is not going into the Haitian economy. Could the aid dollar, pound or Euro go five times as far in Haitian hands? If so, as seems logical, it would mean more homes, more jobs, more cash in the local economy. The flip side is equally obvious: fewer IDPs, less gender-based violence, less cholera in fewer IDP camps. Win-win.

Perhaps everyone, government, NGOs, IHRC, should go back to where they should have started: consulting the homeless, trusting the people, mobilizing the energy and enterprise of ordinary Haitians who are endlessly active whichever way you look in Port-au-Prince. All it requires is the allocation of micro lots of land to kick-start the process. Set aside land, wherever, and they will come, as the one camp on government expropriated land at Corail Cesselesse proves (see Haiti Briefing 66). Is that so much to ask?