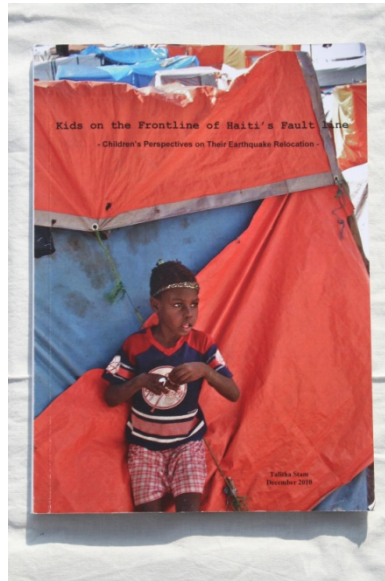


Kids on the Frontline of Haiti's Fault line - Children's perspectives on their earthquake relocation, 2010, by Talitha Stam



Talitha Stam wrote this thesis in the field of Masters in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Utrecht.

Talitha went to Haiti only two weeks after the earthquake to do participative research on children's experiences in three relocation camps.

(It is important to note that Talitha was born in Haiti and grew up in the Netherlands, and that this visit was her first re-encounter with her birth country.)

She set out to study the earthquake not as a natural disaster but as a social process. She wanted to know how the earthquake had affected the children's lives in Haiti and what coping mechanisms they developed to the disaster. She also wanted to find out to what extent pre-existing (pre-earthquake) social structures had an impact on the formation of social networks after the disaster.

One of her remarkable conclusions is that pre-existing social networks indeed influenced in significant ways people's responses and adaptation strategies to the disaster and that the patterns of social organization after the earthquake strongly resembled those pre-earthquake. There was a tendency to re-establish the social networks that were lost. For instance a survey she conducted revealed almost identical family structures pre and post- earthquake. How was that possible if children had lost their family members? The story of Obert -one of the boys Talitha followed throughout her study -tells us how: how he found a new mother:

" I woke up because something was softly scratching at my feet. It tickled. First I saw a street dog running away. I thought it was the dog. So I closed my eyes again. But I felt the tickling again. When I opened my eyes again, there was a woman sitting next to me. She offered me a small packet of water. The woman asked me where my family was. I told her that I don't have any family anymore. I cried. (...) The woman caressed me on my head. The woman told me that she would take care of me as her own son. I am so happy! It feels like I have a mother again!"

So children either went back to their families – if they had any – or they sought replacement for the lost family members, and this was possible because “family” in Haiti is not strictly defined in terms of “blood relationships”.

But Talitha also shows how pre-existing social structures and particularly systems of power can hinder the capacity of actors to respond and cope with the disaster. In one of the camps for instance gang members from before the earthquake had taken control over the camp by declaring themselves ‘administrators’.

As you may have realized already, the thesis Talitha Stam produced is impressive in many ways. Not only is it a very personal project in which her personal engagement was crucial for the quality and uniqueness of the ethnographic data she generated, as well as for the choice of taking children’s perspectives.

She also showed great creativity and versatility in the use of methods that ranged from a survey to in-depth interviews, participant photography and participant observation, which entailed living in one of the relocation camps herself.

The thesis is extremely well written. The stories of the children are at the same time incredibly moving, scientifically insightful, and also relevant for post-disaster interventions in very practical ways.

It is therefore that we found this thesis to be an excellent candidate for this thesis competition.

Silke Heumann, Institute of Social Studies (ISS)