



## Giving birth to a child in the rubble

### The "mother and child" medical module of Swiss Humanitarian Aid



The paediatric unit at the University Hospital of the State of Haiti. © SDC

**Experience of the Haitian earthquake in 2010 showed that the vast majority of medical teams are providing care for victims rescued from the rubble, at the expense of other patients such as pregnant women, newborns, and sick children. Accordingly, SDC Humanitarian Aid has developed a medical module that will, in the future, also help these vulnerable people.**

In January 2010, the earthquake in Haiti killed more than 230,000 people. While the efforts of the medical teams focused on survivors from the rubble, the fate of those who had escaped from their roofs collapsing was largely overshadowed. This situation was particularly difficult for pregnant women and infants who did not have access to care during the days following the earthquake.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mortality during childbirth was already very high in Haiti even before the earthquake: 1 in 44 Haitian women risk death during childbirth and out of 100 newborns, over 6 die in their first year. The earthquake has further compounded the situation.

### **Special care for mothers and children**

Based on this experience, Swiss Humanitarian Aid has developed a "mother and child" module within its rapid response teams that are deployed during natural disasters. The module is a medical unit composed of trained personnel including paediatricians, anaesthetists, obstetricians, as well as midwives and nurses, which supplement local staff and medical devices. Partnerships are established with Swiss hospitals in order to mobilise a sufficient number of medical personnel.

On a 49-day mission in Haiti, doctors of the module participated in around 300 deliveries including 55 caesarean sections, and more than 796 surgical procedures. These figures provide an insight into the volume of potential beneficiaries of the "mother and child" module. They also demonstrate its relevance in countries like Haiti where the birth rate is very high.



Born during the earthquake in Haiti: life goes on nonetheless... © SDC

### **Designed to respond to other crises**

While the earthquake in Haiti constitutes the starting point for this module, it is also designed to respond to other natural disasters such as floods. It can also be deployed in particularly fragile contexts, such as in conflict situations that create massive population movements. Since 2010, Swiss Humanitarian Aid has been working to improve its operations and expand to other areas concerning motherhood and childhood.

As an integral part of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid rapid response teams, the duration of the module is designed for 4 weeks. Thereafter, it is the local doctors who take over the task. The "mother and child" module is installed in areas where resources are scarce, having first obtained the consent of the local authorities and the medical staff on site. The location of the module is

determined by the following criteria: damaged health facilities, lack of basic medical care, lack of staff and the extensive presence of mothers and children.

### **Emergency surgery to basic medicine**

The module is divided into two phases, which allows it to adapt to changing medical needs. Indeed, experience shows that during the first few days after a natural disaster, the demand for surgical operations soars; however, this fades subsequently and gives way to a greater need for basic medical care. These two phases are always carried out in cooperation with local staff.

For Swiss doctors therefore, it is a matter of assisting their counterparts on site during the critical phase when the need for surgery is very high. It is a great challenge for those who, from one day to the next, must carry out their profession in often chaotic working conditions. In spite of the extreme conditions, these professionals also strive to promote breastfeeding and emphasize the importance of providing vaccines.



Sterilisation of surgical equipment. Cooperation with local staff is an essential element in the implementation of the module. © SDC

**Project at a glance****Domain**

Humanitarian aid

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**Subject**

Health

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**Country/region**

Global

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**Partners**

Swiss hospitals

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**Background**

In a country like Haiti, where the birth rate is high, an earthquake like the one in 2010 seriously complicates the situation for pregnant women, newborns and infants. These vulnerable people are in need of medical attention, even if the country is in a state of emergency.

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**Project objectives**

To ensure basic medical care in surgery, paediatrics and obstetrics for about 100 patients.  
To involve local staff to ensure sustainability of the project.

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**Target groups**

Mothers and children.

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**Costs**

Varies depending on the mission.

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**Duration**

The module team is deployed for a period of 4 weeks.

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**Contact**

[hh@deza.admin.ch](mailto:hh@deza.admin.ch)