Haiti has little luck. Violent tropical storms hit the country with scandalous frequency, ruining lives and forcing the country into repeated rebuilding efforts. In 2004, Hurricane Jeanne killed 3,000 people, mostly in Gonaives, while in 2008, four consecutive storms killed hundreds more across the country. Hurricane Matthew in late 2016 smashed through southern Haiti, killing hundreds and leaving 200,000 homeless. As the climate changes, the frequency and severity of these storms may be expected to increase. And while earthquakes are far less common, the capital, Port-au-Prince, was levelled in 2010, killing over 200,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands more without homes or jobs.

Haiti also has little resilience. While it shares an island with the Dominican Republic, the same storms affect the two countries in very different ways. With a functioning government, growing economy, and relatively vibrant civil society, the Dominican Republic has been able to invest far more in the necessary capacities to protect against, and recover from, natural disasters and other crises. Haiti, on the other hand, has a weak government, a subsistence economy, and a national trust deficit that undermines efforts to improve the country’s economic and political prospects.

In a country where development efforts too often add up to less than the sum of their parts, improvements to the country’s resilience – at state, economy, and societal levels – will be important for moving up the development ladder. But for improvements to take hold, with progress in some areas compounding successes in other areas, much more investment is needed in the baseline human capacities – a healthy and literate population – that underpin all other efforts. The rapid expansion of a universal public education system, in particular, would be an important step in improving the country’s overall resilience and long term development prospects.

A resilience challenge

The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti routinely ranks at or near the bottom of global development and fragility indices. Life expectancy is more than 10 years lower than in the Dominican Republic, while the GDP per capita is barely one-eighth as large. The literacy rate hovers around 60% and a large proportion of children do not attend school or are forced to drop out early (data sources disagree on how many). There is almost no public education system, with most schools run by the private sector or charitable organisations, including by the many international groups which proliferate in the ‘republic of NGOs’. As these schools often require tuition payments, too many families are unable to send their children to school at all.

Haiti has never experienced effective, capable governance nor consistent application of the rule of law. People thus place little trust in the institutions of the state or the politicians who seek to control
And while the discussion above emphasised the
was finally sworn into office in February 2017.
new government, led by President Jovenel Moise,
of major civil unrest is greatly diminished, and a
the MINUSTAH mission is a sign that the threat
there is positive news to be found. The end of
Despite the apparent bleakness of this picture,

The bottom line

Despite the apparent bleakness of this picture,
there is positive news to be found. The end of
the MINUSTAH mission is a sign that the threat
of major civil unrest is greatly diminished, and a
new government, led by President Jovenel Moise,
was finally sworn into office in February 2017.
And while the discussion above emphasised the
difficulties ahead, most human development indi-
cators, from literacy to life expectancy, have been
slowly creeping up over recent decades, though at
a much slower pace than in many other developing
nations. The challenge is for Haiti to start moving
up the rungs of the development ladder at a much
quicker pace. Improved resilience against storms
and other crises would help facilitate this process.
And while Haiti provides an important example
of the limits of what the international community
can and should do, consistent and long-term sup-
port from international partners will still be im-
portant. The EU has been emphasising support
for resilience in its development and humanitarian
activities for several years. The EU Action Plan for
Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries wisely empha-
sizes that efforts be country-owned and led, and
people-centred. For Haiti, this has translated into
€420 million in support – via the 11th European
Development Fund (2014-20) – for four well-cho-
sen priority sectors: public administration, educa-
tion, urban development, and food security. Other
major donors such as Canada and the US, how-
ever, each have a different balance of priority sec-
tors. The onus is on all these donors to ensure that
these are supported in a manner that is consistent,
fully aligned with Haitian goals, coordinated with
other international partners, and with sufficient re-
resources to really budge the needle on basic poverty
reduction and human development.

If the long-term goal of development workers is to
put themselves out of work, then it will be impor-
tant to help Haiti better develop its most im-
portant resource: its people. The government’s 2013
Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper listed ‘education
and human and social development’ as the first
of the country’s five priorities for the subsequent
years. With enough resources, Haiti could even
pursue a bolsa familia conditional cash transfer pro-
gramme that has proved so successful in Brazil and
other countries. These programmes provide aid
to families to ensure that children stay in school
and receive vaccinations, fighting the long-term
entrenchment of absolute poverty and providing
essential investment into Haiti’s human capital.
Supporting national education efforts over the next
two decades may be the most important role that
the international community could play in helping
Haiti improve its resilience and escaping the pov-
erty trap.

Gerald Stang is a Senior Associate Analyst at the
EUISS.