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Transcending the Past to Build Haiti's Future

Summary

- Efforts to build a better Haiti following the catastrophic earthquake of January 2010 are complicated by the challenges of addressing urgent needs, including elections and the cholera outbreak, that run parallel to the rebuilding process and that present an enormous challenge to Haiti's under-resourced and weakened government.
- Enactment of the Haitian government's internationally-endorsed and ambitious action recovery plan is hindered by the apparent lack of an over-riding operational framework that will help to ensure not only implementation, but also coherence.
- Donors and other international actors would be wise to embrace Haiti as a country that has highly propitious fundamentals for successful economic growth, and to build on them.
- Without important shifts in political, economic and social paradigms, the prospect for Haiti's future as a better country that can sustain and expand progress and can improve prospects for all its citizens is clouded.

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Introduction

Key elements for achieving the monumental task of building a better Haiti after the January 12, 2010 earthquake include significant investment, determined leadership, strengthened institutions, coordination among actors, long term commitments and an operational plan to translate intention into action. A better Haiti, however, will also require important shifts in political, social and economic paradigms that are deeply enrooted within the country and in the perception of and approach toward Haiti by external actors. Without paradigm shifts that transcend the past, prospects for building a better country for all Haitians will remain as elusive as they were prior to the devastating quake.

Known Facts and Immediate Challenges

Facts surrounding the earthquake are well-known. 300,000 dead, including at least 16,000 civil servants; 400,000 or more orphans; 1.5 million Haitians homeless, jobless, and dependent on humanitarian interventions for food, water, temporary shelter, and health care. Hundreds of thousands of buildings including homes, schools, universities, churches, businesses, and almost all government ministries and the National Palace were destroyed.

Steps taken after the quake by the Government of Haiti and the international community with a

view in mind of creating a better Haiti included an array of conferences, symposia and roundtables in and beyond Haiti; a needs assessment; an action plan for recovery and national development; and a variety of reports and propositions. Some of those were put forth in Haiti by presidential commissions, the private sector, and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Territorial Development (CIAT).¹

Even before the quake, Haiti's longer term plans and efforts toward poverty alleviation, environmental rehabilitation, and economic growth—ergo 'building a better Haiti'—were sidetracked or eclipsed by floods, storms, cost of living crises, and by politics. Today is no different. The government of Haiti, already under-resourced prior to the January disaster that depleted it of key personnel and stripped it of its already limited infrastructure, faces three immediate challenges. First, it must provide leadership for rubble removal, reconstruction in the quake zone, and the resettlement of more than a million displaced citizens. Second, it must conduct a national presidential and parliamentary election that will most likely include an unprecedented run-off round for the presidential post, and then manage the transition to a new government. Third, it must deal with unexpected developments such as the cholera outbreak currently spreading throughout the country and the protests the outbreak engendered.

Meeting even one of these enormous challenges would test any government. Meeting all of them will require extraordinary effort by Haitian officials and considerable assistance from the international community.

Beyond the Immediate: Translating Intentions into Action

The Haitian government's internationally endorsed action recovery plan envisages four major emphases: territorial, economic, social and institutional. The territorial or quake-zone focus is on rubble removal, land expropriation, urban planning and rebuilding the public administration infrastructure. The economic emphasis is on national production, restoration of economic and financial circuits, and access to electricity. Social priorities comprise health, food security, nutrition, water and sanitation, and high labor intensity works, while institutional aims concentrate on democratic institutions, public administration, justice and security.

The plan is both inspirational and ambitious. It designates land northwest of Port-au-Prince and in the city's historic downtown quarters for expropriation to achieve rational urban planning, including the creation of a new public administration enclave in the downtown zone. It emphasizes the necessity to focus on both the quake-affected Port-au-Prince metropolitan area and the rest of the historically neglected country. If this emphasis can be achieved, the long-festering dichotomy between the "Republic of Port-au-Prince" as the center of attention, services, decision-making and investment, and the "Republic of Haiti" as the ignored and impotent backwater will weaken. As opportunities outside the capital expand, the unmitigated rural to urban migration that boosted the capital's population from 750,000 in 1985 to 3 million in early 2010—one-third of all Haitians—will subside.

Investment in growth poles and development corridors in places other than the capital city represent important first steps in a much-needed decentralization and rebalancing of the country, as does investment in the agricultural value chain – from seeds, tools and irrigation to value-added crop transformation and marketing. Agriculture employs 66% of Haitians who have jobs, yet comprises only 28% of the country's GDP. Improving productivity through investment in this long neglected sector will not only revitalize food crop production, but will boost the job-producing capacity of the shattered agrarian economy in towns and villages throughout Haiti.

A critical missing element of the action plan is a clear and coherent blueprint for its implementa-

tion. The Interim Haitian Recovery Commission (IHRC), a key institution created to support the plan, functions as a project approval mechanism. It has begun to fulfill its mandate, recently approving approximately 200 projects. The IHRC, however, does not control funds for the implementation of the projects it approves, and to date only one third of its approvals have acquired donor funding. Additionally, coherence in IHRC approvals remains uncertain as projects are approved on an individual basis. Years ago, Haiti became known as a 'country of projects' as hundreds and then thousands of NGOs received international funding to undertake a kaleidoscope of projects with little or no coherence among them. In many respects, the current need to build all of Haiti back better—not just the devastated quake area—is a testament to the failure of this incoherent 'projectitis' approach to development.

The apparent lack of an operational plan raises questions about the feasibility of the envisaged land expropriation-driven urban planning and reconstruction scheme. It also raises questions regarding the extent to which plans and activities have been communicated with the Haiti population. For Haiti to be built back better for all, it is essential that the population be an inherent part of the reconstruction effort.

Paradigm Shifts and Transcendent Challenges

In late 2008 economist Paul Collier pointed out that unlike failed states he had studied elsewhere, Haiti has highly propitious fundamentals that could contribute toward its success.² These include the fact that Haiti is not part of a troubled region, its neighbors are peaceful and prosperous and not engaged in supporting guerilla groups, it is free from typical structural problems and ethnic division, and it does not have a military establishment with delusions of a political role. He also pointed out that Haiti is far from hopeless. Indeed, it benefits from a large, proximate diaspora with a reservoir of skills, access to financial resources and prospects to serve as a powerful political lobby. It also has good political leadership by the standards of most post-conflict situations, economic opportunity through preferred access to US markets, and the presence of a UN peace-keeping force to guarantee security. One key paradigm shift that will help to achieve a better Haiti requires international actors to accept and build upon these promising qualities, i.e. see the glass as half-full, not half-empty.

In mid-2010, a report on Haiti issued by the Rand Corporation reiterated Collier's findings, but also noted that "Haiti's poverty, like its governmental weakness, is a product of its political culture," suggesting that "any effort to build a stronger, more resilient Haiti, one that is less dependent on external help, will depend on changing that culture."³ Changing a political culture based on nepotism, clientelism, ineffective bureaucratic administration and politically motivated violence to one that embraces public service, institution building, trust and a fight against corruption will require an effort of transcendence among not just Haitian political and economic elites, but also religious, university, civil society and peasant leaders.

Shifts in social and economic paradigms are also essential to building a better Haiti. From a rent-seeking economy based on venality, lack of vision, elitist posture, deal-making and archaic legal systems, Haiti must shift to an economy that strives to improve the value of its human capital through education and skill acquisition, that embraces risk-taking, and that eliminates bottlenecks that stymie the creation of new enterprises—including small and medium ones—and hinder trans-border commerce. Lastly, Haiti's societal construct based upon the exclusion of the majority of its citizens must shift to one of equity, the fight against poverty and the development of a middle class that is educated and capable of enhancing its culture and assets. A parallel shift from cynicism to ethics, pride and self-esteem, public engagement and a willingness to debate and

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based on a public forum and meeting of USIP's Haiti Working Group on October 29, 2010. The featured speaker was Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis, former Prime Minister of Haiti (2008-2009). Robert Maguire, Chair of USIP's Haiti Working Group and Associate Professor of International Affairs at Trinity Washington University, was a discussant. Robert Perito, director of USIP's Haiti Program, served as moderator.

communicate transparently will complement and reinforce the totality of these shifts. Local initiatives for change, including those often spearheaded by women, play an important role in initiating or reinforcing a more inclusive society, and healthier economy, and a productive political culture.

Windows of Opportunity

Since the ouster of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986 opened an uncharted path for Haiti's political, economic and social future, the country has failed to move forward on a steady and sustained basis toward resolving the complex issues and deeply-enrooted problems that have stymied its development. The promise of a better Haiti, for most Haitians, has rung hollow over the intervening years. The prospect of building a better Haiti in the aftermath of the catastrophic tragedy of January 12, 2010 offers yet another window of opportunity. The enormity of the task of confronting immediate urgencies while building better will require an unprecedented effort among all involved to transcend the problems, practices and failures of the past.

Endnotes

1. "Haiti Tomorrow," Inter-Ministerial Committee for Territorial Development (CIAT), March 2010 available (in English) at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/38650492/Haiti-Tomorrow-English-version>
2. "Haiti: From Natural Catastrophe to Economic Security—A Report for the Secretary-General of the United Nations," Paul Collier, December 27, 2008
3. "Building a More Resilient Haitian State," Keith Crane, et.al. Rand Corporation, 2010, pp. 17



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