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Can the Diaspora Solve Haiti's Enduring Social Conflict?

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Since the founding of the Haitian Republic in 1804, political repression and economic hardship have prompted Haitians to leave their country in search of a better life.

Haitians living abroad have demonstrated a capacity for hard work and a willingness to take on difficult tasks. They have placed a high value on family and on providing opportunities for their children. They have an enviable record of achievement in business, the arts, public service and academia, and have also shown a spirit of generosity toward those who remained in Haiti.

Financial remittances from the diaspora exceed \$1 billion annually, an amount larger than the total of foreign assistance. The diaspora also donates goods, services and village improvement projects. Could the talented and energetic people of the Haitian diaspora do more? Could they help resolve the chronic social conflict that has troubled the Haitian republic since its inception?

The question of how the Haitian diaspora might help Haiti's new government was discussed at a meeting of the Institute's [Haiti Working Group](#) on July 25, 2006. Principal speakers included **Dumas Simeus**, chairman of Simeus Foods International; **Jean-Claude Martineau**, author, poet, and historian; and **Francois Pierre-Louis**, professor at Queens College, CUNY and author of *Haitians in New York City: Transnational and Hometown Associations*. [Robert Perito](#), senior program officer for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations, moderated the discussion. Following is a summary of the views expressed by the speakers and members of the Haiti Working Group.

Haitians Flee a Dictator's Wrath

In 1957, Jean Claude Duvalier seized power through fraudulent elections and began a campaign of violence against his opponents, implementing curfews and terrorizing the population. Those who spoke out against this repression were often tortured, forced into exile, or made to disappear. Those who could afford to escape fled to North America and Europe, leading the way for a growing Haitian diaspora. Throughout Duvalier's rule, the diaspora was vocal in telling the world about the atrocities being committed by the regime. At home, Haitians were warned against contact with those living abroad and discouraged from inviting their return.

When Duvalier was ousted from power in 1986, many Haitians returned home. But the mistrust of the diaspora that had been instilled by the regime made it difficult for those who returned to reintegrate. Returnees were seen as arrogant troublemakers who wanted to flaunt their wealth. Those who had remained in Haiti and endured hardships resented those who had left in order to enjoy a better life.

Returning Haitians brought with them expectations and customs acquired abroad that set them apart and made them less tolerant of conditions and practices in their home country. Tensions between the two communities caused many to return abroad and to counsel others in the diaspora to be satisfied with helping Haiti from afar.

Hometown Associations Assist Communities in Haiti

In the United States, Haitians from the same community organized "Hometown Associations" that held "pot luck" dinners, sports events, and other kinds of social gatherings. Associations in New York City formed a network known as Federation des Associations Regionales Haitiennes a L'Etranger. These organizations enabled Haitians to share news from home, enjoy Haitian cuisine, and preserve Haitian culture. They also provided opportunities to raise money that was used to provide humanitarian aid and village improvement projects in Haiti. Associations built schools and clinics, dug wells, paid teachers salaries, and sponsored youth activities. These development projects were done unilaterally, however, without reference to government ministries or national priorities. Such assistance was deeply appreciated by village residents, but it did little to raise the overall standard of living in Haiti or empower the Haitian government to address problems on a national level.

In 1991, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide attempted to formalize relations with the diaspora by creating a cabinet-level ministry called the "Tenth Department" to coordinate the assistance received from hometown associations and other diaspora groups. Aristide's overthrow and the subsequent period of military dictatorship and social chaos largely negated this effort to bring the diaspora into a dialogue with the government on economic and social development in Haiti. In 1994, the U.S.-led intervention appeared to offer an opportunity for the mass return of representatives and resources from the diaspora, but the window closed quickly. Many of those who returned to Haiti full of enthusiasm left after a time, sobered by their experience.

With the election of President René Préal another opportunity is taking shape for members of the diaspora to assist Haiti. On July 13, 2006, President Preval attended a conference in Port au Prince organized by professionals from the diaspora that explored potential collaboration with the new government. To his credit, Preval requested funding from the International Monetary Foundation and the World Bank to create a program that would invite members of the diaspora to work in Haiti at the same salary that they are paid abroad. Such a system would allow Haitians with technical skills to utilize them in Haiti.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the Preval government will undertake the difficult legal, institutional, and social reforms required to engage effectively the diaspora in Haiti's development. Administrative 'red tape' and antiquated banking and investment laws discourage investment. Among the government's first tests will be whether it keeps President Preval's promise to provide the Ministry for Haitians Living Abroad with the staff and resources required to manage relations and coordinate contributions, including development projects, from the diaspora. Haiti offers a rich culture, a relaxed lifestyle, the joys of association with family, and the opportunity to use their talents. All are powerful incentives for people who want to return to Haiti contribute to advancing the common good.

Can the Diaspora Solve Haiti's Problems?

Historically, Haitians have looked to the diaspora for solutions to the country's political, economic, and social problems. The feeling is "Haitians are successful abroad. Surely they can bring success to Haiti." Unfortunately, history has also shown that returnees have been unable to rise to the occasion. For those returning to Haiti, there are a number of personal challenges that confront them on arrival. These include: (1) differences in living conditions and the absence of amenities; (2) lower salaries coupled with higher costs of living in order to maintain comparative lifestyles; and, (3) popular attitudes that make it difficult for returnees to assume leadership roles, particularly those who are not members of the traditional elite. Street crime, political violence, and widespread corruption also serve as disincentives to those who might

contemplate a long sojourn.

Beyond personal challenges there are practical difficulties that make it unlikely returning Haitians will succeed. Most important is the absence in Haiti of the institutions and conditions that Haitians have utilized to obtain success abroad. Among the barriers to progress in Haiti are:

- A rigid system of social stratification that ascribes preferred status on the basis of family of origin, skin color, and the ability to speak French;
- Absence of efficient governmental institutions that effectively provide social services, including health care and education, regardless of social class;
- Lack of access to credit and venture capital for small businesses and entrepreneurs, which discourages new ventures and investment; and,
- A corrupt judiciary and ineffective police force that fail to provide rule of law.

Absent critical social, legal, administrative, and financial 'infrastructure,' returning Haitians have been as handicapped as local residents in trying to move the country forward. The new Haitian government's ability to solve these practical problems will determine whether the diaspora can contribute to breaking the cycle of conflict and improving social and economic conditions in Haiti.

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Second USIP public event held by the Haiti Working Group.
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- [Haiti's Future](#)
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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Robert Perito](#), senior program officer, and Greg Maly, program assistant, in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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