



USIPEACE BRIEFING

Toward the End of Poverty in Haiti

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SUMMARY

This *USIPeace Briefing* describes the challenges needed to ending poverty in Haiti.

OVERVIEW

In July 2006, Haitian poet and historian Jean-Claude Martineau spoke at USIP and said that Haiti is the only country in the world with a last name—“Haiti, poorest country in the western hemisphere” —as described in the media. Sadly, in the two years since, conditions have worsened. [Four severe storms](#) that struck Haiti in September 2008 only exacerbated the already critical problem of the country’s poverty.

In the wake of recent tragedies, President Préval has called for Haitians to unite and begin to rebuild the country. Can such an effort realistically succeed?

The challenge of reducing poverty in Haiti was discussed by a panel of distinguished experts at a recent [meeting](#) sponsored by the Institute’s Haiti Working Group. Principal speakers included:

- Jacques Edouard Alexis, former Prime Minister of Haiti and current executive director of the Center for Research and Education in Haiti;
- Stephen Horblitt, director, external relations, Creative Associates International;
- [Charles Call](#), Jennings Randolph Fellow, USIP.

[Robert Perito](#), director of Haiti Working and a senior program officer at USIP, moderated. The following is a summary of views expressed during the meeting.

A “REPUBLIC OF NGOS”

Haiti’s path toward overcoming poverty will require both Haitians and international actors to overcome obstacles that have contributed to the country’s current condition. Inequality and social division based on skin color, prejudice, class, and geography has resulted in an extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the exclusion and marginalization of the majority. A distorted and dysfunctional concept of “Big Man” leadership has bequeathed a legacy of political instability and bad governance where rulers are more interested in their own—or group—interests than the common good. Leadership based upon self-interest has left Haiti bereft of functioning public institutions and heavily dependent on external resources to finance the country’s development.

That more than 500,000 school-aged children are unable to attend school in a country of about nine million is symptomatic of this tradition of exclusion, misrule, weak institutions and external dependence. Across Haiti, poverty has bred a growth in crime and desperation has also brought an increase in violence. Amnesty International reports that sexual violence against women and girls is pervasive. Pregnant women are at great risk because of the poor state of the health care system. Only one in four of all births in Haiti are assisted by a health care professional.

Responding to the challenge of alleviating poverty in this complex and problematic environment has presented international actors with limited options that have resulted in failed strategies. Lacking reliable Haitian interlocutors and confronted with weak state institutions, international organizations have taken it upon themselves to undertake development programs. Haiti has been called a “republic of non-governmental organizations” that provide basic services, from external donors, which are usually the domain of the state. The result has been not development, but a kaleidoscopic array of activities that barely keep the country afloat.

With a legitimately elected government in place, the tendency to bypass the state has several deleterious effects. Priorities identified by Haitian actors have been eclipsed by externally prioritized goals; state institutions have remained weak, underdeveloped and deficient in their ability to generate revenue; reliance on NGOs has undermined state authority and accountability; and talented Haitian managers and technicians have opted to work with international organizations instead of the state.

THE “GOOD GOVERNANCE DEFICIT”

Hence, a number of key actions are critical to help Haiti end poverty. Addressing the country’s “good governance deficit” is one of them. The existence today of a legitimate government that was the product of a free and fair election, and that government’s efforts to establish a pluralistic and inclusive approach toward governance, are positive steps in this direction. To avoid a reversal into the spiral of instability that has hindered Haitian political, economic and social development, a holistic development strategy—a paradigm shift—is necessary.

One part of that strategy is the serious, long-term commitment to Haiti among international actors and a more realistic approach to helping Haiti as it tackles long-standing and ongoing challenges of governance, national reconciliation and social and economic situation recovery. Full government participation to identify needs, priorities and approaches to addressing these challenges is a key element of such an approach.

In this regard, the government of Haiti’s poverty reduction strategy, developed in 2007, merits consideration. Enactment of the strategy was put off when an envisaged April 2008 donor’s meeting was postponed following a parliamentary no confidence vote on the prime minister and his government. The plan, which demonstrated local ownership of the development process, remains valid in assisting international donors respond to Haitian priorities. As such, it represents a new modality of Haitian-international cooperation that seeks interaction cooperation with international actors, but that also places the government of Haiti

in a leadership position. Rescheduling a donors' meeting in early 2009 is critical to providing resources to move forward and to enact a new modality of Haitian-international cooperation.

The damage inflicted on Haiti by this fall's storms necessitated an urgent and intense focus on relief and recovery operations. Even as those operations continue, the storms' toll mounts. The destruction of agricultural land, crops and food reserves has led to widespread malnutrition and a growing number of deaths from starvation. During the week of November 17, 2008 alone, 26 severely malnourished children in southern Haiti died and officials warned that more deaths were imminent.

In Gonaives, the consequences of environmental degradation resulting from extreme poverty remained evident in the three million tons of mud and detritus that continued to clog the city. In Port-au-Prince, the storms fatally weakened two poorly built schools that collapsed, causing the deaths of 91 children and dozens of injuries. As this tragedy showed, buildings throughout Haiti are often constructed without reference to building codes or the involvement of trained engineers and construction workers.

Paralleling the need for immediate relief and recovery, however, is equally important attention to medium- and long-term development priorities. Haitian priorities include education; agricultural production and food security; tourism, culture and human resources; communication and transportation infrastructure; and energy infrastructure improvements. Widespread reliance on charcoal as the primary source of cooking fuel has exacerbated deforestation, depriving Haiti of the vegetation needed to control erosion. Other priorities include judicial reform and improved public health. While a layer of geographic and institutional decentralization overlays these priorities, decentralization without effective state oversight runs the risk of local politicians manipulating the situation.

CONCLUSION

Despite Haiti's dire poverty and the setbacks it has experienced in 2008, hope remains and bold initiatives are needed. Mobilizing country's population through a national program to create jobs to rehabilitate the country's natural and man-made environment and provide employment for Haiti's youth is one such initiative. In the end, however, vision without action will lead nowhere, and action without vision will not succeed. Haiti's road toward ending poverty will require vision combined with appropriate and sustained action and the balanced cooperation of both Haitian and international actors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Robert Maguire](#) is a senior fellow in USIP's Jennings Randolph Fellowship program. This *USIPeace Briefing* was written in collaboration with the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations' Haiti Project. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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The Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace awards approximately ten residential Senior Fellowships each year so that outstanding scholars, practitioners, policymakers, journalists, and other professionals can conduct research on peace, conflict and international security. [Chantal de Jonge Oudraat](#) is associate vice president of the Jennings Randolph Program.

The Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations designs and manages the Institute's efforts in areas emerging from conflict. The Center also conducts research, identifies best practices, develops new tools for post-conflict peace and stability operations and supports related training and education efforts. [Daniel Serwer](#) is vice president of the Center; [Robert M. Perito](#) directs the Center's Haiti Working Group.

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