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OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPMENT

HAITI, THE REMAINING CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## **Introduction**

It is tempting, speaking of poverty in Haiti, and even too easy for that matter, to draw inspiration from the recent exceptional research and documentation work of New York Times journalists.

Indeed, in May 2022, they revived the universal memory of the infamy of which Haiti was a victim for having been forced, at gunpoint, to pay France, a former colonizing power, a double so-called "debt of Independence." This ransom, which Haiti had to pay by borrowing French banks to the fullest, prevented the young nation from offering its population better living conditions. Haitian government could not understand that the "Economic Gangsters" were already in action nearly two centuries before (Fisman and Miguel, 2008) denounced them in their fascinating masterpiece.

In this same perspective, it is equally tempting to align one's reflection with the thesis, published a decade earlier than this series of New York Times articles by Acemoglu and Robinson, expressed in another magnificent work where these researchers made the brilliant demonstration of "Why Nations Fail" (2012). While appreciating the inestimable value of the contributions of that extraordinary research and others that preceded it, this analysis certainly takes up some of their views. Still, it deviates a little from their overly general approach. Instead, it chooses to penetrate Haiti's socio-political and economic practices and other socio-cultural factors, including the refusal of the Haitian elite and even ordinary citizens to get involved in a coherent and supportive way.

Indeed, we observe a Haitian population forced to survive daily and deprived of formal economic education and education to ensure its well-being. So, optimistically, how can we ask such a population to work for its prosperity or achieve long-term goals, the SDGs, which it has not internalized or has not appropriated?

This analysis has chosen to infiltrate the meanders of specific local and national realities in all objectivity. In fact, without relativizing the weight of the criteria attached to external aid, this brief study sought to identify some of the current internal obstacles, some hidden and others manifest, to the development of Haiti.

### **Literature Review**

Haitian elites are tired of hearing it, but the facts are long-established. The Haitian Institute of Statistics and Informatics found that Haiti is the poorest country in the Caribbean region (IHSI, 2003) and, as confirmed by the United Nations Human Development 2020 report, one of the poorest in the world (cited by World Bank, 2021). At first glance, the concept of poverty has several dimensions in development. Therefore, we must reach a consensus for this study to guide our approach. The World Bank, cited by Steiner, describes poverty as "a pronounced deprivation of well-being." By highlighting its different aspects, that institution insists on limited access to education and health care, low incomes, social exclusion, and the vulnerability of local populations exposed to risks (Steiner, 2005).

The Development Assistance Commission of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development agrees and defines *poverty* as "the inability to achieve certain standards in terms of economic, social and other well-being" (OECD, Working Paper, No.3603, 2005). To put in light the dimensions of poverty mentioned earlier, the Commission retains five of them. First, the economic extent identifies poverty as the acquisition of insufficient income to meet basic needs. Secondly, we can consider the human dimension, which insists on an individual's access to basic needs, such as education, health, housing, and food. The third dimension is political and refers to the non-enjoyment of civil and political rights when state actors do not consider them when

elaborating public policies. The fourth dimension of a socio-cultural nature relates to social exclusion and disregard for the dignity of citizens. The fifth dimension of poverty is people's protection and implies their vulnerability to social, economic, and security crises.

With those approaches in mind and the latest surveys conducted on living conditions in Haiti (IHSI, ECVMAS, 2012), it is necessary to admit the chronic poverty of Haitian populations. It deprives them of opportunities to meet their needs, rights, and freedoms. Indeed, the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program places Haiti at the rank of 170 out of the 189 countries in terms of deficiency in the quality of life (UNDP, Human Development Report 2020). On the other hand, the already mentioned survey on living conditions in Haiti in 2012 (IHSI, ECVMAS 2012) revealed that 59 percent of the Haitian population lived below the national poverty line (U.S. \$2.41/day), while 24 percent lived in extreme poverty. The IHSI confirms that three-quarters of the Haitian population is poor, and more than half, or nearly five million, are even far below that line. The first category refers to people living on less than two U.S. dollars a day, and the second to those living on less than one dollar.

Consequently, due to the weakness or non-existence of appropriate infrastructure, the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms enshrined in both the legal instruments, including the International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Haitian Constitution of 1987, is denied to a large majority of the Haitian population. These include, for example, the rights to primary education, decent housing, excellent hygiene conditions, water, electricity, employment, and access to credit. This situation has an immediate effect, increasing the vulnerability of Haitian populations to socio-economic crises and considerably reducing the human and growth potential of Haitian society.

That situation got even worse for people living in rural areas. In this regard, the Inter-American Development Bank's 2020 report, citing (Ghayad et al., 2019), points out that about 45 percent of the Haitian population lives in rural areas, where nearly two-thirds of the people are considered chronically poor (IDB, 2020). Rural populations representing most of the country's population suffer from food, economic, political, exclusion, and insecurity. However, this "population has never participated in the country's political life. The debate is essentially urban; the small peasantry does not participate" (Trouillot, 2006). It is worth noticing that the SDGs promote inclusion, which means there is no way a country can achieve them by excluding from its policies a specific category of its population.

We face in Haiti a disadvantaged population sunk into an abyss of poverty, whose basic needs for water, food, housing, and health are not addressed. Under such conditions, that poor, marginalized community with the lowest life expectancy in Latin America, 51.9 (UNDP, HDR 2020), is asked to make a long-term commitment and mobilize for local, nationwide sustainable development. Instead, they focus on developing daily survival strategies that do not even serve their well-being. Moreover, even locally, the State's actors' inability to meet their needs does not alleviate most Haitian people's despair, frustration, and disenchantment.

### **The low capacity of local authorities to address local expectations**

The recognition of the capacity of local populations, also called autonomy, to take charge of themselves to meet their immediate needs is part of inclusive and sustainable development.

However, this nominal capacity must be part of reality to make local self-government efficient.

This autonomy means "all the financial and human, technical, administrative, social, economic and scientific resources to achieve a given objective" (Privert, 2001). In the case of Haitian

municipalities, the objective to be achieved by the local authorities is the improvement of the living conditions of the population through the delivery of essential public goods and services

One might object here that the delivery of these services is conditional on the payment of taxes by taxpayers. The challenge, however, remains, namely, how to ask such a poor population to pay taxes to support local development? One way of saying that these fees are practically non-existent. Admittedly, these fees, seen as a form of participation of the local population, if honored, would serve to establish the capacity of the Municipality in the provision of local services. However, the latter, because of the weakness of the institutions, does not have sufficient authority to obtain this participation.

This refusal of the Haitian population to participate in public affairs is, in our view, a function of the same observations made by Fjeldstad, quoted by (Steiner 2005), in many local authorities in South Africa. The researcher found that the local populations have developed mistrust in three dimensions in this country. In the first place, it is a suspicion about the genuine willingness of local authorities to provide the desired services. Secondly, this mistrust has to do with the fairness with which the state actors will collect these revenues and distribute the services; thirdly, the population cultivates a doubt about the good faith of other citizens to honor their tax fees.

However, it is essential to note the heavy dependence of both the populations and the administrations established in the local Haitian authorities on a centralizing State, contrary to the wish of the Haitian Constitution expressed in its Preamble. One could tolerate to some extent that the Haitian government appropriates some privileges and specific resources for the sake of order or in the perspective of an equitable distribution of the country's resources for more social justice.

That is not the case because Haitian state structures inherited from a colonial past, confirming the

thesis of (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008), set to perpetuate marginalization and stand far away from good governance principles.

### **The State's failure to adopt the principles of good governance**

To meet the growing needs of its citizen, modern States comply with some universal rules arranged under the heading of good governance. These standards, developed by international institutions, aim, through the reform of their public policies, at the performance of States. The latter will have to appropriate them beforehand, that is, to adapt them to their country's needs and realities without alienating or isolating themselves. Indeed, the appropriation of reform policies is a critical element of a sustainable development strategy.

Good governance refers to the ability of the State to serve its citizens by allocating and managing resources in such a way as to solve collective problems, in other words, to achieve the social results expected by citizens (Brodhag, 2001). Development experts and research institutions have developed performance indicators; the best known are Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, the World Bank's, and the latest, the United Nations' SDG performance indicators. Among these indicators, these institutions distinguish participation, which is the opportunity for all citizens to participate in the decision-making process.

On the other hand, transparency presupposes that the action and decisions of public administrations are, to a certain extent, open to the examination of other national actors, intending to attract the support of the social body and international actors. Equity, for its part, requires that all men and women be able to improve their living conditions and maintain their well-being; efficiency and effectiveness need public administrations to focus on quality production, particularly in the services provided to citizens.



Good governance also implies the responsibility of actors, including the government, the private sector, and civil society organizations. The rule of law is also another element. This principle recommends that public authorities enforce laws equally and transparently. The adoption of the latter principle, forethought, puts the State in a position to anticipate the problems that will arise based on available data and observed trends, as well as to develop policies that consider developments, costs, and foreseeable changes in terms of for example, demographic, economic, environmental (OECD, Working Paper No. 236).

The Haitian State is moving so far away from these principles that the situation inspired the Haitian economist, Etzer Emile, to sum up such choices under a bold title: "Haiti has chosen to become a poor country" (Emile, 2017). The author, targeting both the state authorities and the governed, argues that our failings, economic and political choices, and refusal to seize specific opportunities have conditioned Haiti to languish in poverty after more than two centuries of Independence. So true that, as of 2022, with no surprise in terms of performance, Haiti ranks 151 out of 163 countries, with 14 out of the 17 SDGs still highlighted in red (Sachs et al., 2022), which means the significant challenges remain for most of the Haitian population to reach a standard of living.

### **The weight of corruption and foreign aid**

One may consider that these rules mentioned earlier, faced with the socio-economic and political realities of a country like Haiti, are idealistic. Nevertheless, two facts remain certain: international aid and sustainable development are conditional on the appropriation of these principles. It is then easy to understand that good governance imposed from the outside, in an environment suffering

from political will, cannot produce the results that citizens expect. A synthesis report of the lessons learned by donors in Haiti had already reached that same conclusion.

This report highlighted the governance deficit that keeps the Haitian people in the dynamic of survival, far from our previously mentioned collective well-being. Despite the many benefits of international aid, researchers found that it also has its setbacks, including some constraints based on the unrealistic demands of international donors themselves (Labrador & Roy, 2021). Indeed, the scattered interventions of the latter, by creating a form of dependence of the developing country on foreign aid, contribute to further weakening government structures or state institutions (Id.). Moreover, international assistance often does not consider the country's political, sociological, and cultural realities or the capacity to implement or absorb public policies made for developed countries. However, the factors most relevant to implementing suitable governance measures are related to the Haitian State itself.

In the absence of a state capable of enforcing the law, especially since a political and commercial elite jealously guards power, national and local institutions are plagued by corruption.

Transparency International's perception index, supported by the report of the Anti-Corruption Unit, an autonomous national institution, ranks Haiti among the most corrupted states in the world (T.I., 2021). However, once the State's credibility falls apart, the call for the reform of public services will grow (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Hence, the incapacity of the State to meet that population's demand puts the country at risk of a social breakdown. Such a potential event would go beyond the dimensions of simple hunger riots similar to those erupting in the country in April 2008 and February 2019.

This weakness of the Haitian State, unable to take concrete measures to alleviate the misery of its citizen, reinforces, on the one hand, its dependence on international institutions and, on the other, pushes Non-Governmental Organizations to replace it. By absorbing international aid, the latter quite often inject it into programs that poorly articulate urgency, rehabilitation, and long-term development. Furthermore, the State is weakening even more. The management of humanitarian aid confirmed that statement after the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, which many national and international actors regularly denounce as a big failure (Pro Publica & NPR, 2015). This lamentable socio-economic and political situation, aggravated by the lack of political will of Haitian governments, makes the country retain the status of an underdeveloped country, weak State, fragile or failed State which, as a result, will be unable to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Considering the above, the shared responsibilities of the Haitian State and the international community seem as evident as the difficulties paving the way for the development to which the Haitian people aspire. However, despite the multiple charges against the Haitian State, we must remember that the lethargy of non-State actors or Civil society is an obstacle to achieving this ideal. We will deepen that in the following section.

### **The lack of civil society engagement**

As highlighted in previous research, the implementation of any public policy by a State requires the support of civil society organizations (CSOs) for its success (Janvier, 2017). In its Spring Meetings, 2017, the World Bank and, prior to that, the UNDP Report on Kosovo 2008 define them as “non-governmental organizations, community groups, labor unions, indigenous people’s

movements, faith-based organizations, professional associations, foundations, think tanks, charitable organizations, and other not-for-profit organizations."

In the

case of Haiti, since the events of February 2004 that brought down the elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, the concept of civil society has been ambiguous. Let us decide at the outset, for the avoidance of doubt, that under this heading, we include grassroots, sociopolitical, and non-governmental organizations, trade unions, independent media, universities, investors, and other centers of decision-making. Some prefer to speak of non-state actors or local elites whose dynamism or permanent mobilization leads local populations to take charge of their destiny. Even if it means evoking one or the other of these two concepts from time to time, we will retain the concept of civil society for the convenience of our analysis.

At the center of the debate on democratic governance and local development, research indicates that the capacity of the State to respond effectively to local needs requires a strong commitment from organized civil society. This mobilization of civil society for the development of a country represents what experts who align with Robert Putnam call social capital, a true heritage for a country, a region, a local community, and becomes an essential condition for the well-being and autonomy of a country. Upon the (OECD, Working Paper No. 236), it is mainly the case in Bolivia, Honduras, Mali, and the Philippines, where the will of public opinion has made some noticeable changes in favor of collective well-being.

Conversely, extreme poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and illiteracy define the general situation in Haiti. That shows the little commitment, if not the resistance to change, of the elites occupying the spaces of political and economic power. They deliberately adopted that attitude to maintain this system of social order with limited access evoked by Acemoglu and Robinson.

Something that another study qualifies before them as a system of "*insiders*" (Meisel & Ouadi, 2007). Associated with the political power from which they enjoy privileges, holders of economic power make investments aimed at the short term, in areas of their choice, according to political fluctuations.

Thus, the fields likely to benefit the local populations and engage the country in the path of competitiveness remain unexplored. This social justice problem arises in the country characterized by the high cost of living, the poor allocation and quality of public goods and services, the waste of resources, and social inequalities. At the origin of the country's instability through the struggle of political factions, this predatory system opposes any reform of institutions, thus hindering emancipation and local autonomy by promoting social exclusion instead. That is one of the best ways to describe the attitude of the economic and political elite toward the rest of the Haitian population. To summarize, when considering article 52.1 of the Haitian Constitution of 1987, civil society or local elites threw away its social responsibility and failed to promote civil rights and freedoms.

### **A weak citizenship awareness**

That failure appears in other areas. We have mentioned earlier the refusal of the impoverished masses scattered throughout the country to participate in public affairs. One of the factors linked to that reluctance, which must be considered here, is these populations' low level of political awareness. Indeed, according to an OECD study, citizens' level of political awareness is decisive for their participation in the management of public affairs (OECD, 2004). However, civic education, or education at all, becomes an absolute necessity to reach that goal.

The latest Human Development report mentioned earlier found a literacy rate in the country below 62%. In such conditions, it is evident that neither the Haitian State actors nor the civil society provides the population with this basic need to make it emerge from its obscurantism.

In the same vein, local elites, including political parties, universities, and grassroots organizations, do not sufficiently feed the public space or the debate on local development. That is where lies this lack of political awareness or citizenship. As everyone already knows, there is no citizenship, and probably no state, without enlightened citizens from within. It, therefore, becomes clear that this lack of light limits the ability of the poor masses to influence the democratic process positively.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that the evidence, successive governments, and civil society actors in Haiti and the State, obsessed with their immediate interests, constitute a blockage to the reform or consolidation of democratic institutions. Far from developing among local populations in need of identity and self-esteem, a culture of responsibility oriented towards progress through the implementation of long-term projects, far from directing them towards collective actions or teaching them their rights and duties, socio-political actors instead abuse their ignorance. They prefer to turn them into destroyers rather than builders of long-term development. We cannot conceive of such a development without a policy of inclusion that must start from the bottom, local communities. Many countries such as Rwanda, China, and Cambodia have experienced the same traits that Haiti is currently facing. These countries, both to ensure the well-being of their populations and bring them into line with modernity, have recently taken off economically by empowering local populations, including the poorest. We observed that anytime an elite takes good care of the poorest, once the socio-political and economic elites carry out their supervisory mission, the State obtains the support and confidence of its citizen, which is necessary for

legitimate public action. At the same time, the State benefits from a stable environment conducive to economic growth and long-term development.

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