

Prominent Haitians devise long-term survival plan

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Andrew Chung



Haitian children walk out of a local restaurant after receiving a free meal in Petionville on Feb. 18, 2010.

EITAN ABRAMOVICH, AFP/GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO

PORT-AU-PRINCE—Biting on his lower lip, Marcelus Villefranche shifts his gaze from the elegant National Palace, which now resembles a collapsed angel food cake, to the endless sea of tents that occupy the once-serene Champ de Mars park.

A metaphor, all of it, for the thoughts swirling in his head.

"This is what has become of my country," says the accountant who has never actually found a job as an accountant. "This is what has become of my people.

"Broken."

Overcrowding, deforestation, agricultural collapse, political violence, endemic corruption, extreme illiteracy and unemployment.

And now, relative to Haiti's size, the most destructive natural disaster in modern times.

How can Haiti catch up to its dismal legacy, let alone get past it?

While the future may seem bleak, surprisingly Haiti is not without a plan.

Beating Haiti's infamously impotent government to the punch, a group of 33 Haitians, some living abroad, some in Haiti, has quietly come up with an unprecedented, remarkably detailed road map for the country's future following the devastating earthquake of Jan. 12, which hit 7.0 on the Richter scale.

Led by a businessman belonging to one of Haiti's best-known families, the Strategic Plan for National Salvation, 173 pages long, was published last week. It's believed to be the first comprehensive, long-term plan for Haiti since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986.

"For years the government hasn't been able to do this," says Rudolph Boulos, coordinator of the group and a well-known pharmaceutical company owner from a wealthy Haitian family. "But a group of Haitians did it in just five months, with entirely their own resources."

The plan, having the dimensions of a Marshall Plan for Haiti, revolves around decentralizing the economy and services away from Port-au-Prince – a theme now espoused far and wide including by President René Préval, as well as Canada and the United States. It also proposes sweeping reforms of agriculture, development and education.

The cost? An estimated \$100 billion over 25 years.

Boulos points out it's not much more than what Haiti is currently receiving in aid from the United Nations and individual countries.

Combined with the \$2 billion in remittances from the diaspora, he says it can be accomplished.

"There are always criticisms that it's always the international community (taking action), that Haitians aren't taking up a role in terms of initiative or comprehensive plans," says Carlo Dade, executive director of Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas. "So it's incredibly important that the diaspora and people in Haiti

have invested the time and effort to do something like this. As a symbol of movement in the country it's huge."

Key to the plan is to create a national development bank to direct the rebuilding effort, to receive money that is "wasted today" and through which members of Haiti's vast diaspora, a large number of whom reside in Montreal, could invest by buying bonds.

The bank would finance all aspects of development, from large agricultural and education projects to microcredit loans to entrepreneurs.

The plan will require employment based on merit, and political leaders with a thirst for change.

Traditionally, Boulos says, Haiti has been governed by a "small group that fills its pockets and takes power but without ever providing the people with services."

The report also highlights how Haiti became dependent on international aid: "Long-term management was neglected in favour of crisis management, immediacy and humanitarian aid."

There is a nation, but no state apparatus, Boulos argues. "That's why this country for 200 years has been governed like a plantation."

The Jan. 12 earthquake, which killed 217,000 and injured another 300,000, erased 50 per cent of Haiti's businesses.

The Washington-based Inter-American Development Bank says that based on Haiti's size and population, the catastrophe is vastly more destructive than the Indonesian tsunami of 2004.

Volcy Assad, press secretary for Préval, said no one in government knew about the plan.

"We'll take it into consideration, analyze it, see what's good for the country. The government is listening to everyone," Assad says.

While it's working on its own plan to present at the major reconstruction donor conference in New York next month, Assad deflected criticism of the government's lack of a long-term vision.

"You can't have a plan when there is so much political instability," he ventures. "For 50 years there has been instability."

He continues: "Since 2006, the president has worked at stabilizing the country. We had before the earthquake what you can call a start."

That's partly true. Préval has helped create an atmosphere such that businesses have dared to seek a return to the island. However, he has been accused of moving too slowly with reforms and average Haitians say nothing has changed.

Valéry Numa, one of the most popular radio hosts in Haiti, has followed the progression of the plan, from the first meeting in the Dominican Republic last fall, to now.

"It's a good report," he says. "It's an opportunity to propose an exit from the crisis in Haiti."

The quake, Numa insists, is Haiti's great moment to start from scratch.

Haitian expatriate Sauveur Étienne concurs. "There are two Haitis: the one before Jan. 12, and another after Jan. 12," says the Montreal resident, who obtained his doctorate in political science at the University of Montreal, and who is one of the report's editorial committee.

"It's critical we start over, to act differently, to lead differently," he says. "Otherwise it's suicidal."

The report offers specific cures for structural ailments – reforming ministries for better service, for instance, increasing government revenues by making the lottery a government entity, eliminating school fees at the primary level and vastly building up tourism.

Whether the group can get its message across is unclear. It's not as if average Haitians trust those they consider the bourgeoisie more than the government. And the government has historically had suspicions of this same group.

Villefranche is a 36-year-old accountant who has never found work in his field since he got his certificate eight years ago.

He's worked in a gas station, a grocery store and a brewery, but never an office.

He's got suspicions like everyone else, but also hope. "All we can have is hope. That's all we have left."