

Engaging the Haitian Diaspora in Development

Seminar Series on Migration and Development

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On March 29, FOCAL convened the second of an ongoing series of seminars on “Migration and Development” issues aimed at bringing together migration experts and policy-makers to discuss important development priorities and effective practices. The rationale for this month’s seminar was to create a multi-sector space for discussion about a new way forward for Haiti and, particularly, about useful ongoing and new roles for the diaspora in development efforts.

Participants heard presentations on this topic by four guest speakers: Manuel Orozco, Director of remittances and development at the Inter-American Dialogue and a respected researcher on the topic of diasporas in the Latin American and Caribbean region; Jean-Claude Icart, Research Chair for Immigration, Ethnicity and Citizenship at Université de Québec a Montréal (UQAM); Kathleen Felix, Project Director and Diaspora Coordinator for FONKOZE, an alternative Haitian bank for the organized poor; and Norm MacIsaac, Program Director at the Trade Facilitation Office in Canada.

The following three questions were posed to frame the presentations and discussion:

- Can and should the Haitian diaspora be engaged for the reconstruction and development of Haiti?
- How could we best engage the Haitian diaspora for the reconstruction and development of Haiti?
- What best practices are there to draw upon between the diaspora and Haiti?

Dr. Icart was the first presenter to share his comments on the issue. His presentation focused on describing three important dimensions of the Haitian diaspora’s role with their country of origin: economic support, political engagement and human resource transfers. On the first dimension, he noted the active involvement of the Haitian diaspora in fundraising efforts —both individual and collective— including a noticeable rise in financial transfers following the Jan. 12 earthquake.

At the same time, however, Dr. Icart stressed the need to reform remittance transfer structures to ensure they yield maximum impact. Dr. Icart also mentioned that lobbying efforts for democratic development are more successful from abroad rather than at home: “What can be said outside cannot be said inside.” On the human capital dimension, he called on the international Haitian community to find means of reversing brain drain, such as exploiting the benefits of new technologies and practices. This would also need to be complimented by a new approach to development by aid agencies, whose methods may undermine the effectiveness of Haitian efforts to help themselves in some cases.

The second seminar speaker, Dr. Manuel Orozco, gave a sobering presentation on the key questions facing the Haitian diaspora and the realities facing their engagement in their home country. He started off by pointing out that a

distinction exists (albeit often muddled) between the Haitian “diaspora” and Haitian “migrants,” arguing that perhaps it is time to recognize the vast diversity of Haitians living abroad. The implication was that perhaps it would be helpful to put forward different strategies depending on which segment of the diaspora we plan on engaging.

Dr. Orozco furthermore asked: “What kind of engagement and at what level?” Existing levels of financial engagement are clear; among other statistics, he cited that 70 per cent of Haitians living abroad remit funds regularly —about \$150 per month. Collectively, these transfers represent almost one third of Haiti’s GDP. However, a broader engagement in development will remain a function of the capacity Haitians have to engage and the enabling of resources to help them in this regard.

The three key “realities” put forward by Dr. Orozco on the challenge of harnessing Haitian diaspora engagement were: a) the need to build confidence between the international Haitian community and their home government; b) the need to maximize financial benefits —including mobilizing savings rather than putting an emphasis solely on transfers—; as well as c) targeting training and capacity-building to community/diaspora associations who wish to engage but have not been able to in the past.

The next speaker, Kathleen Felix, shared her knowledge of diaspora and development through her work at FONKOZE, a microfinance institution dedicated to helping the Haitian poor through increased access to banking and financial transfers. FONKOZE currently has 42 offices and 2,000 credit and education centres across Haiti. According to Ms. Felix, the organization was born out of Haitian diaspora interest to better channel their funds in Haiti.

Ms. Felix’s presentation highlighted a number of FONKOZE tools and approaches that support community development and financial democracy in Haiti including: an incremental approach to working with marginalized communities (building a ladder to success), a focus on gender (99 per cent of FONKOZE’s beneficiaries are women), creating capacity-building opportunities in poor communities as well as innovative financial services (a new pre-paid VISA is a prime example). She also stressed the importance of supporting independent successes on the part of the diaspora, including through hometown association projects in education, health and productive investments: “diaspora cannot do it all but they can help support the development process.”

Ms. Felix concluded by urging us to improve development activities by focusing on projects that generate revenue in Haiti and that support the aspirations of both local and diaspora communities.

Norm MacIsaac, Director of Programs at Canada’s Trade Facilitation Office (TFO) concluded the seminar panel. Mr. MacIsaac recently undertook scoping research with FOCAL in order to examine ways to increase trade between the

Haitian diaspora in Canada and Haiti. He argued that the “untapped potential to link diaspora members with exporters” can yield significant economic gains for Haiti. Mr. MacIsaac remarked that Haitian participants in his research have strong ties to Haiti and have reliable suppliers. Further, there was no evidence of competition among Haitian entrepreneurs; to the contrary, they were interested in working together.

However, his remarks were not all rosy. Barriers to attaining this goal include: the exclusion of the diaspora in Haiti’s largest export industry (textiles), the negative perceptions of Haitian products and of their potential to become mainstream among the diaspora in Canada, and financial barriers.

If more Canada-Haiti trade is to have an impact on Haiti’s development potential, Mr. MacIsaac recommended: a) helping the diaspora place their products in mainstream distribution channels; and b) facilitating Haitian access to tradeshows and trade missions, including by making subsidies available.

Overall, seminar participants seemed to agree that we need to get beyond the question of whether or not to engage the diaspora in development efforts in Haiti, as this is already the case. Rather, the more salient question is what strategies need to be pursued in order to maximize the skills and talents of the diaspora. At the same time, speakers warned that strategies to encourage diaspora involvement should avoid being perceived as creating new obligations for Haitians living overseas.

According to the majority, old tools and strategies for diaspora engagement are still relevant. Still, new tools —such as funding for capacity-building and access to new technologies— are badly needed to complement these efforts.

Participants also mentioned that a more institutionalized relationship with the Haitian government would be beneficial in enhancing diaspora engagement. Some stressed that the need for capacity-building and strengthening lies not only with diaspora organizations but with the Haitian government as well —including with the *Ministère des Haïtiens vivant à l’étranger* (Ministry for Haitians Living Abroad), which has had difficulty implementing many of its planned diaspora engagement plans.

All were eager to see recent transnational efforts to address the needs of the Haitian people continue, including supporting the Haitian diaspora in Canada in this ongoing challenge.

For more information on this seminar series, please contact Barb MacLaren at bmaclaren@focal.ca or 613-562-0005 ext. 230.