

Haiti on the Brink: Assessing U.S. Policy Toward a Country in Crisis
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rooney, distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Thank you, also, for organizing a hearing on this topic critical to U.S. interests and the future of democratic governance in Haiti.

The Republic of Haiti, with its stark authoritarian past, has had a fragile transition to democracy since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986. With its political instability, institutional weakness and rampant corruption, Haiti ranks 161 out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.¹ Rising insecurity and challenges from numerous natural disasters have hampered economic development, stirred citizen unrest and limited the Government's ability to adequately address the democratic deficits impacting the nation. Located 838 miles south of Florida, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Six million, or 60 percent of Haitians, live below the poverty line, and almost a quarter in extreme poverty.² Since the inauguration of President Jovenel Moïse in February 2017, widespread protests have become commonplace. The Administration's policies — increase of government revenue through tax hikes and elimination of fuel subsidies — as well as citizen outrage at corruption and a remobilization of the army — have exacerbated political gridlock, increased migration, economic uncertainty and severely impacted Haiti's governability. President Moïse has nominated three Prime Ministers in his almost three years in office, the government remains without an approved budget and elections for the entire Chamber of Deputies, local offices and two-thirds of the Senate remain in limbo.

An unstable Haiti poses a risk to U. S. national security. Haiti is a large recipient of U.S. aid in the region, second only to Colombia. While U.S.-Haiti policy is, "designed to foster institutions and infrastructure necessary to achieve strong democratic foundations and meaningful poverty reduction through sustainable development,"³ aid has declined in the past decade. From a high of \$380.3 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 to a requested \$145.5 million in FY 2020, a 15 percent reduction from FY2019. Concentration of development assistance at the national level, however, has shown few results as evidenced by the current political and economic conditions across the island. Efforts at bolstering the capacity of local officials and civil society organizations (CSO), youth, private sector engagement and using the talents and resources of the diaspora community will provide a sustainable path toward Haiti's Journey to Self-Reliance (JSR). Targeted foreign assistance on democracy, human rights and governance should be a priority to help Haiti from the brink and get the nation on the right track. This will be more effective at ensuring good governance — accountability, transparency and economic development — to combat endless cycles of corruption, strengthen institutions, rule and law and citizen support for democracy.

¹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2018 – Haiti." *Transparency International*, Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/country/HTI>.

² "The World Bank in Haiti – Overview." *The World Bank*, The World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/haiti/overview>.

³ "U.S. Relations with Haiti - United States Department of State." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-haiti/>.

Political Context

Haiti has been shaken by a series of protests over the past several years. This is mostly due to government disfunction and poor governance. A lack of economic opportunities, continuous political gridlock, and inadequate government responses, and attention to, citizen demands have exacerbated the current political crisis engulfing the nation. Protests, which began shortly after President Moïse took office, escalated in July 2018 when then-Prime Minister Jack Guy Lafontant announced the end of fuel subsidies and tax increases to promote a policy agenda, and secure a loan from the International Monetary Fund, aimed at strengthening Haiti's economy. These included agricultural, health care, energy and infrastructure reforms. Outrage at this announcement, without citizen input, and widespread government corruption claims, led to the decree being rescinded. There have been two Prime Ministers since Lafontant left office. The current nominee, Fritz-William Michel, has not been ratified by parliament, essentially leaving the country without a functioning government.

Mass protests swelled in September 2019, with no end in sight. Haitians are demanding President Moïse step down given the rise in food and gas prices, including corruption allegations stemming from the defunct PetroCaribe fund, an oil alliance between Caribbean nations and Venezuela for preferential oil prices and payment deferrals up to 25 years.⁴ The situation has been worsened by a crisis in public services. Gas and electricity shortages across the country have severely hindered public transportation, most schools remain closed and hospitals are running low on supplies. The Haitian National Police (HNP) have gone on strike demanding better wages and working conditions increasing public safety concerns. Amnesty International reported there have been at least 35 people killed since the protests began.⁵ In the midst of growing instability, the U.S. has sent the Naval ship *Comfort* to assist with humanitarian supplies, treating more than 3,500 citizens.⁶ The U.S. has also released a statement expressing support for democratically elected President Moïse and called for a national dialogue to end the tensions throughout the country. High-level U.S. government officials — U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale — visited Haiti on November 20 and December 5, respectively, to press for an inclusive, national dialogue and need to overcome the challenges to restore a functioning

⁴ The idea was that governments under PetroCaribe would use the monies for economic development and social programs. In Haiti, at least \$2 billion USD disappeared. Nugent, Ciara. "Haiti Protests: What Is PetroCaribe and Why Is It Fueling Unrest?" *Time*, Time, 24 Jun. 2019, <https://time.com/5609054/haiti-protests-petrocaribe/>.

⁵ "Haiti: Amnesty International verifies evidence of excessive use of force against protesters." *Amnesty International*, Amnesty International, 21 Oct. 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/haiti-amnesty-verifies-evidence-excessive-force-against-protesters/>.

⁶ Total U.S. contributions to partners are valued at over \$300,000. The U.S. has provided 12 generators, several examining, operating, and treatment tables, blood donation chairs and recliners, hospital bed, and incubators. Sison, Michele J., and U.S. Mission Haiti. "Closing Ceremony of USNS Comfort 2019 Visit." *U.S. Embassy in Haiti*, 12 Nov. 2019, <https://ht.usembassy.gov/closing-ceremony-of-usns-comfort-2019-visit/>.

government.⁷ Although protests are waning and streets are quieter across Haiti, demonstrations will likely continue given the opposition's uncompromising demand that President Moïse step down. Furthermore, the fact that elections for the entire Chamber of Deputies, two-thirds of the Senate and all local officials should have been held on October 27, 2019, continues to exacerbate the ongoing political impasse and an increasingly fragile environment.⁸

As a result, there are several potential scenarios that could unfold over the next year. First, on January 13, 2020, there will be an absence of a functioning parliament and the Executive will, most likely, begin to rule by decree. This would likely further galvanize the opposition and exacerbate protests. Second, the current parliamentary terms of office could be extended, preserving the untenable status quo. A third option would require a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution or amend the current one. Fourth, the opposition may agree to a national dialogue with the President and a compromise is reached. This is unlikely given the opposition's current stance on having Moïse resign, which he has vowed not to do. Lastly, some experts have suggested the need for a neutral, respected mediator to bring the two parties to the negotiation table.

U.S. Assistance to Haiti

Ever since establishing democratic relations with the country in 1862, the U.S. has played a key role in Haiti's development and advancement toward democracy. From reinstating the first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, after a 1991 coup to support resulting from a devastating earthquake and hurricane in 2010 and 2016, respectively, the U.S. has been actively engaged in assisting in Haiti's development. Foreign assistance to Haiti has consistently declined during the last decade from a high of \$380.3 million in FY 2011. In FY 2020, the Trump Administration requested \$145.5 million in aid to Haiti, a 15 percent reduction from FY 2019.⁹ Most of the U.S. assistance to Haiti has traditionally been focused on health. In FY 2020, for example, only 4 percent of the requested funding was allocated for democracy, human rights and governance (\$6.0 million) while 80 percent was for health projects (\$115.7 million).¹⁰ Focus on democracy and governance and local government institutions can help Haiti on its Journey to Self-Reliance (JSR).

According to the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) JSR's FY 2020 country Roadmap, Haiti has a 0.09 score (on a 0-1 scale) for government effectiveness. This indicator measures the quality of public services, civil service and its independence from political pressure, policy formulation and implementation and the credibility of the government's

⁷ "Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale's Travel to The Bahamas and Haiti - United States Department of State." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 4 Dec. 2019, <https://www.state.gov/under-secretary-of-state-for-political-affairs-david-hales-travel-to-the-bahamas-and-haiti/>.

⁸ Elections have not occurred for numerous reasons, including a lack of a functioning government and approval of a national budget.

⁹ Taft-Morales, Maureen. "Haiti's Political and Economic Conditions." Congressional Research Service, updated Jul. 1, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45034.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Foreign Assistance in Haiti*, ForeignAssistance.gov, <https://foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Haiti>.

commitment to its stated policies. This indicator demonstrates that strengthening institutions, democracy, human rights and governance should be a major focal point of U.S. assistance in need of more funding. This, in turn, will help provide a path toward sustainability and local ownership to Haiti's ongoing governability crisis.

Haiti: A Strategic U.S. Ally

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with over 6 million, or 60 percent of the population, living below the poverty line.¹¹ The country's proximity to the United States, its regional geo-political significance, unstable political climate and increased insecurity leading to an influx of roughly 676,000 migrants to the U.S. out of an 11 million population, has vast national security implications.¹² Geopolitically, Haiti serves as an important U.S. ally in the region. First, Haiti can be considered a partner in countering malign Chinese interference. By maintaining its strong relationship with Taiwan, Haiti helps prevent China from concluding, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), more-opaque and economically questionable infrastructure projects that bring unsustainable debt burdens in this region and increased dependence on China. This is significant given that many countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, including its neighbor on the Island of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic, have close ties to China. By maintaining a good relationship with Haiti, the U.S. will help ensure China does not gain yet another foothold in Latin America and the Caribbean using corruption to secure preferential terms for Chinese state-owned companies and manipulating the information environment to ensure a China-friendly narrative and advance Chinese Communist Party interests.

Second, from 2018 to 2019, there has been a shift in Haiti's approach to voting in the Organization of American States (OAS), siding more recently with the U.S. This is a further testament of Haitian support for democracy and U.S. policy across the region. For example, Haiti voted, in defiance of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) bloc, at the OAS not to recognize the legitimacy of Nicolas Maduro as President of Venezuela. This was not a popular decision among Haitians and demonstrated a fundamental shift in regional politics. This was the first time Haiti voted against the authoritarian Venezuela regime and represented a critical moment of solidarity for maintaining momentum to help end the current impasse in Venezuela. Haiti has taken a similar stance on the increasingly authoritarian government in Nicaragua. Haiti abstained from voting in the OAS in condemning violence in Nicaragua, called for the government to agree on an electoral calendar, voted for a resolution on the situation in the country and in favor of appointing a commission to carry out diplomatic efforts in the country.¹³

¹¹ "The World Bank In Haiti – Overview." *The World Bank*, The World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/haiti/overview>

¹² Schulz, Jennifer, and Jeanne Batalova. "Haitian Immigrants in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*, Migration Policy Institute, 2 Aug. 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-immigrants-united-states>.

¹³ "OAS Condemns Violence in Nicaragua and Calls on Government to Agree to Electoral Calendar." *OAS*, OAS, 18 Jul. 2018, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-048/18..

Local Governance and the Way Forward for Haiti

The governance challenges facing Haiti require a robust response from the democracy assistance community. Building the capacity of local governments and providing support outside of the capital Port-au-Prince, enhancing accountability and state presence, and bringing institutions closer to citizens, while ensuring they have an active role in enhancing their communities, is critical to advancing democratic principles.

The U.S. government has made positive investments in local governance projects such as the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) National Endowment for Democracy-funded initiatives, TetraTech’s USAID-funded LOKAL+¹⁴ and RTI International’s USAID-funded project, Supporting the Efficient Management of State Resources (GERÉ).¹⁵ While these investments are significant, local officials remain in need of support. Municipalities often do not receive their national budget allocations and therefore have very limited resources to pay their own salaries – let alone develop their communities – especially in rural areas. These deficiencies are compounded by the circumstantial (i.e., poverty, high unemployment) and cultural reality (i.e., lack of trust) that tax collection is extremely difficult in Haiti. Beyond these financial limitations, IRI has also found that there is a need to invest in the skills of local officials. Municipal representatives often do not fully understand their roles and responsibilities and could benefit from increased support in leadership, resource management, fundraising techniques, negotiating skills to interact with national officials and citizen engagement, among others.

Since 2016, IRI, for example, has worked with municipal officials and civil society organizations in Haiti’s Greater North area to strengthen their institutional capacity, promote citizen engagement and encourage marginalized groups, including youth and women, to have a voice and participate in political processes. The Institute is helping build basic governing skills, introduce municipal governance best practices supported by civil society among elected and municipal officials based on community needs. Developing political and administrative skills at the local level is much more effective than the current top-down approach adopted by many foreign assistance donors. Given that local officials are on the front lines and have more direct interaction with citizens on a regular basis, IRI’s governance work in Haiti focuses on tailored technical assistance and the creation of action plans that promote citizen engagement and enhance governing skills and democratic best practices with select local officials, including principal mayors, deputy principal mayors and director generals.¹⁶ Several examples can help put issues of good governance into perspective.

¹⁴ “Local Government Capacity Building, Haiti.” *Tetra Tech*, Tetra Tech, <https://www.tetratech.com/en/projects/local-government-capacity-building-haiti>.

¹⁵ “Improving Governance Systems and Service Delivery in Haiti.” *RTI*, RTI, <https://www.rti.org/impact/improving-governance-systems-and-service-delivery-haiti>.

¹⁶ IRI works in the following 10 municipalities — Bas-Limbe, Caracol, Limbe, Milot, Perches, Pignon, Pilate, Port Margot, Saint Suzanne and Vallières.

First, as part of IRI's good governance approach, officials from the municipality of Caracol developed a tax collection campaign to connect with citizens and inform them on how the municipality will use taxes to better their community. While unemployment and a lack of trust toward officials hindered tax collection, the director general reported the five-day awareness campaign distributed a total of 1,477 tax collection forms, building trust between local officials and their constituents. Investing in local governance initiatives such as these, need to be part of a long-term strategy with an emphasis on citizen engagement and viable state presence across the country.

Second, in Pignon, Mayor Nicolas Victorin is challenging the status quo and his experience depicts how youth can serve as agents of change in their communities. In March 2018, Mayor Victorin attended IRI's Generation Democracy¹⁷ (GenDem) Leadership Academy in Panama City, Panama, where youth leaders shared experiences, best practices and lessons learned. During the event, Mayor Victorin sought regional partnerships, including with then-Panama City Mayor Jose Blandon. Mayor Blandon invited him to return to Panama to share his story and experience during a series of events commemorating Black Ethnicity month, an annual celebration in Panama. In May 2018, Mayor Victorin returned to Panama and participated in a fundraiser concert for Pignon organized by the host municipality. The \$3,200 raised, helped support a six-month micro-loan program for 10 women and a cassava-root business in a rural commune near Pignon that is still running strong.¹⁸

By leveraging its Generation Democracy network in Haiti, IRI is providing young leaders with a platform to discuss opportunities, share lessons learned, experiences and strategies for mobilizing peers. Fabrice Dugas, President of Groupe ECHO Haiti, which promotes youth innovation and participation in national development efforts, has also participated in Generation Democracy, IRI's flagship global youth initiative, sharing their experiences with young leaders from the region and around the world. As Dugas noted, "I gained the energy I needed to do more [...], to inspire others, to empower others, to fight for the Haitian youth. Because if all of these young leaders can do it, so can I."¹⁹

IRI has also been working with local civil society organizations (CSOs) across the Grand North region to improve advocacy and oversight of local governments. The Institute has supported the creation of a Grassroots Departmental Network (GDN), with support from USAID, composed of 15 local CSOs from across the region. The creation of the GDN is significant because of the centralized nature of decision-making in Haiti and the need to provide a voice to leaders outside the capital and at the local level. In partnership with the University of Haiti-Campus Henri

¹⁷ Generation Democracy is a global network of young leaders across 70 countries that seeks to bridge the gap between youth and government.

¹⁸ Mitchell, Roger. "Transforming Regional Experiences into Action: A Story from the Youngest Mayor in Haiti." *Democracy Speaks*, The International Republican Institute, 14 Aug. 2014, <https://www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/transforming-regional-experiences-action-story-youngest-mayor-haiti>.

¹⁹ Dugas, Fabrice. "Generation Democracy Testimonial: 'Panama Found Me.'" *Democracy Speaks*, The International Republican Institute, 25 Apr. 2018, <https://www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/generation-democracy-testimonial-panama-found-me>.

Christophe de Limonade (UEH-CHCL), IRI is conducting a seven-month long certified course teaching 28 members of the GDN how to be agents of change in Haitian civil society. The course provides an opportunity for participants from a diversity of backgrounds to learn about the functions of government, how to hold their governments accountable, advocate for their rights, as well as identify priorities in their communities. Participants are currently drafting policy recommendations on issues of interest to shape the narrative across the country. IRI is also working with UEH-CHCL to develop a Policy Hub within the campus to serve as a repository of knowledge for local actors across the Grand North area.

Grassroots movements have emerged across the region, including in Haiti with the “Petro Challengers,” who are mostly young middle-class citizens frustrated with the status quo and corruption which in turn led to the mass protests that have paralyzed the country for more than two months. Both national and local officials seem to be afraid of engaging with their constituents. The lack of engagement with citizens is compounded by poor public relations and communications skills, both internally and externally. Indeed, President Moïse’s speeches during the current crisis, the first one was a prerecorded message that was disseminated at 3:00 am with very little substance, show an insensitivity toward citizens and have aggravated the current political situation.

Recommendations for U.S. Foreign Assistance in Haiti

There are many political, economic and security challenges in Haiti’s democratic governance landscape that should be addressed through U.S. foreign assistance. A cornerstone of this strategy is strengthening local Haitian institutions. Though providing humanitarian and health assistance is important and critical, it will not have the intended impact without strong democratic institutions to ensure these investments are being efficiently and effectively distributed. Sustained engagement by the U.S. is crucial to ensuring Haiti moves toward a more stable future, where crises can be averted, and U.S. interests protected. The following recommendations are a step in the right direction.

First, a sustained focus on local level governments and bolstering the capacity of civil society organizations is necessary. There is often an overemphasis to concentrate development assistance at the national level, yet local leaders are on the front lines, interacting and addressing citizens’ concerns. If local level governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) work together, there is an opportunity, a space, to improve accountability and transparency, critical for advancing democracy. Building the capacity of civil society organizations are a means for citizens to organize and hold their leaders accountable. IRI has had positive results at the local level where politicians and civic leaders are willing to learn essential leadership and accountability skills.

Generally, CSOs in Haiti are extremely politicized and tend to be used as a steppingstone into political parties or government positions. This is problematic because CSO leaders are often focused on short-term interests and therefore cannot truly hold government officials accountable. CSOs seem to be concentrated at the national level and there’s a dearth of effective organizations at the local level. Most of the CSOs that IRI works with are grassroots

organizations with very broad mandates and objectives. There is a need to strengthen local grassroots organizations with specific skill sets, as well as to help them specialize in strategic areas of interest, such as democracy and governance.

Second, a focus on youth, a third of Haiti’s population,²⁰ to serve as agents of positive change in their communities is critical. Youth involvement in civic engagement and outreach will empower them as leaders and help them become more interested and involved in the political process.

Third, there is a need for more public opinion research to better understand the challenges Haitians face to inform national and international policymakers and effectively design and implement U.S. foreign assistance programs. Research and qualitative and quantitative public opinion data are a cornerstone of IRI’s approach to programming. IRI implemented a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) in Haiti to help understand the problems and opportunities impacting the decision-making and sectoral influence of political, electoral, and civic actors both at the national and local levels. The PEA served as a tool for IRI’s governance approach in country. More mixed method surveys are greatly needed to inform and adapt future U.S. foreign policy and assistance in Haiti.

Fourth, as described in USAID’s Journey to Self-Reliance, private sector engagement has an important role to play to ensure the sustainability of foreign investments. The support of entrepreneurial spaces, incubators and accelerators, such as Banj, are an example of the positive impact the private sector can have in equipping young Haitians with marketable skills and providing spaces to co-create and innovate.

Fifth, the U.S. should continue to work with Haiti’s diaspora community as a critical element in the foreign assistance process. The diaspora community represents 11 percent of Haiti’s population.²¹ In 2018, remittances represented 31 percent of Haiti’s gross domestic product.²² This community, which maintains close ties to the island, can serve as champions to address gaps and challenges facing the nation through financing of projects, providing human capital, expertise and technical know-how to help shape and inform Haiti’s future.

Conclusion

Haiti is at a critical juncture. Rampant corruption, diminished rule of law, weak institutions and a lack of adequate responses from governments, including citizen outreach, are fueling popular discontent and are responsible for the country’s continued dysfunction. In order to set the country on a path to stability and democratic reform, citizens must be included in decision making

²⁰ “Republic of Haiti – Country of Origin Information Paper.” *INURED*, INURED, Aug. 2017, http://www.inured.org/uploads/2/5/2/6/25266591/unchr_coi_haiti_final_redacted_report_inured.pdf).

²¹ OECD/INURED (2017), *Interactions entre politiques publiques, migrations et développement en Haïti*, Les voies de développement, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264278844-fr>.

²² “World Bank Migration and Remittances Data.” *The World Bank*, The World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/>.

in areas that impact their lives, their families, their communities. Ensuring transparency, accountability and enhanced participation and stakeholder support at the local level is key to ensure this cycle of discontent becomes an opportunity for citizens to feel democratic governance is the best way forward. Assessing U.S. policy toward Haiti, a country in perpetual crisis, is never easy and can be frustrating. Yet, the U.S. commitment to Haiti, needs to remain strong. Haiti's proximity to the U.S., its regional geo-political implications and relevance to our national security has never been more important. Supporting a strong, committed and empowered local governance in Haiti is but one economically sensible tool at the disposal of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus.