

HAITI ADVOCACY WORKING GROUP (HAWG)

HAWG is a working group of international development, faith-based, human rights and social justice organizations advocating on issues related to U.S.-Haiti policy.

DECENTRALIZATION: HAITI'S ANSWER FOR SIX MONTHS AND SIXTY YEARS¹

The plan for Haiti's future must include and be guided by the vision of those who are living the reality of life after the quake, those who will carry it forward: Haitians. They have many times articulated this vision, either following some natural (e.g. hurricanes), or man-made catastrophe, including political. The long-term solution begins with Decentralization.

Haiti's center of power - political, social, and economic - resides almost exclusively and even jealously in Port-au-Prince. It is a historical power-grab that leads to the severe inequality in the distribution of resources, ultimately causing the capital's demographic explosion, since hope for access to resources and work lures millions to migrate there. Aid distribution from the international community even reinforces the distribution imbalance between population and projects development, investment, infrastructure and other resources.

Well before the earthquake, living conditions for the majority of the capital's residents had been steadily deteriorating. This situation results from the fact that Port-au-Prince is a city that was built to accommodate only 200,000 residents, but is now engulfed with nearly 3 million. As a result of the capital's overpopulation, more than 230,000 people died unnecessarily during and in the aftermath of the earthquake. This fact shows the need to decentralize. Finances, politics, education and health care cannot continue to be concentrated in only this one urban area.

Centralized Haiti: The Republic of Port-au-Prince

The extensive destruction the earthquake caused, particularly in the capital, was precipitated by the historic centralization of services and industry in Port-au-Prince, and the lack of investment in the countryside. Decades of neglect turned huge swaths of Haiti's agricultural land, at one time some of the richest and most fertile in the world, into desolate areas that produce partial harvests at best. The migration from rural areas to the urban center of Port-au-Prince is a manifestation of rural communities' desperate effort to access services they sorely need.

Haiti's centralization began under colonial rule and was further reinforced during the 1915-1934 U.S. occupation. The fundamental cause however, of the Port-au-Prince population concentration was the decades-old policy of devaluing agriculture, and the refusal to invest in rural areas. These conditions resulted in the extremely high loss of life. Moreover, lack of investment in infrastructure and ports outside the capital posed serious challenges to the post-earthquake emergency response. Haiti's one international runway and the Bay of Port-au-Prince's damaged wharf slowed aid delivery and personnel response, resulting in many preventable deaths.

¹ Excerpted from "Haiti's Answer: At Six Months and Sixty Years" by Melinda Miles, Let Haiti Live, a project of TransAfrica Forum July 12, 2010.

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Multiple organizations contribute on a case by case basis to issue or sector specific recommendations and positions expressed in HAWG materials. These materials are not designed to be consensus positions and have not been explicitly endorsed by each organization active in the HAWG.

The Immediate Need: Internally Displaced Persons at Six Months

The biggest obstacle to moving people out of the unhealthy, inhumane, and dangerous spontaneous communities that sprang up following the earthquake is the relocation of internally displaced persons (IDPs). With the confusion created by the idea that property rights – the ability claim and profit from a piece of land – are on par with the right to survive, Haitians are left to suffer in tent cities. The Haitian government is not invoking eminent domain to make land available to families that are living in the parks, streets, and medians of Port-au-Prince, Leogane and Jacmel.

The aid community has left camp inhabitants without access to basic services. This strategy seeks to avoid luring people back to Port-au-Prince from the countryside with the promise of services in the camps. This perversely reinforces a “blame-the-victim” mentality, by implying that people prefer life in Port-au-Prince's dangerous encampments in the midst of earthquake rubble. However people have nowhere else to go. Rural areas have been on a steady decline due to lack of investment. Of the 600,000 survivors who left the capital after the earthquake, many have returned because the scarce resources that are needed to survive are mostly distributed in the capital. However, even more people would certainly leave Port-au-Prince and not return if the conditions in the countryside were adequate. The initial departure of more than 500,000 people to the provinces is indicative..

The Answer: Implementing Decentralization

Decentralization is the short-term immediate solution to the terrible living conditions of Haiti's IDPs, but is also the long-awaited manifestation of the population's desire for their future: a long-term strategy to redistribute resources and bring the Haitian people out of desperate poverty. The first concrete step toward decentralization is recognition by actors in Haiti's recovery that there is a decentralization plan, and each actor has an important role.

The Government of Haiti's Action Plan outlines both immediate and long-term concrete steps to improve the living conditions of the majority of Haitians. The solution is a decentralized Haiti and the de-concentration of the population in Port-au-Prince. It creates the circumstances Haitians need to access basic services and employment, no matter the region of the country in which they reside.

Concrete strategies to solve Haiti's biggest decentralization challenges include:

1. **Infrastructure:** need to expand roads, ports and additional international airports. That expansion would help end the capital's monopoly on international air travel, and help create job opportunities and regional development throughout Haiti.
2. **Basic Services:** services like education, referral hospitals, and electricity need expansion in the country's developing zones and sub-zones. The creation of “local distribution networks of electrical power to fuel growth” is endorsed by the Action Plan.
3. **Political Governance:** Haiti's 1987 Constitution includes specific recommendations to decentralize governance. The country is broken into Departments, each divided into municipalities which are split into communal sections. The Action Plan includes specific steps to decentralize administration and services, as well as to invest in regional development projects.
4. **Agricultural & National Production:** The Action Plan contains instructions for investment in rural areas outside urban centers, including funding for farming resources and equipment, construction of rural roads, recapitalization of agricultural enterprise and improved irrigation systems.

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