

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.

LAND RECLAMATION IN HAITI

BACKGROUND

After Haiti gained independence from France in 1804, Haitian independence leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines nationalized substantial tracts of land and granted ownership to the privileged who happened to be residing on it. The first post-independence Coup d'Etat rose up in large part as an over-heated dispute over land tenure. The descendants of these counter-revolutionaries now own much of the land that was obtained through outright intimidation, theft, or falsification of papers. To this date, the system of land tenure in Haiti is largely based on a class-based and racist division of land assets. Patrick Elie, a Haitian democracy activist explains, "Land tenure in Haiti is total chaos. This is the result of the behavior of the Haitian elites over centuries. They have expropriated land and, especially after independence and the end of slavery, they appropriated vast tracts of land... Now there is a lot of discussion about who owns what piece of land."

POST-EARTHQUAKE

In the months after the January 12 earthquake, the Haitian parliament voted to cede power to the Interim Commission to Reconstruct Haiti (IHRC), comprised of foreign bankers and governments along with 13 members of Haiti's elite. The IHRC has the right to seize land and redistribute it, and can do so without any prior consultation with Haitian Civil Society or impacted communities. Kim Ives, of Haiti Liberté explains, "The bourgeoisie has been put in charge of re-settling the squatter camps. They have the best land in suburban Port-au-Prince, large tracts of land very suited to building new cities." Rather than using the elite-owned tracts of land, which are large and ideal for relocation, the interim commission is taking away land from working people. The placement of new residences is part of a haphazard process; according to Mayor Ralph Lapointe of Ganthier and many other mayors, both judicial authorities and the police are collaborating with the Commission, but have failed to communicate with the peasant communities that are directly affected (Democracynow.org 7/14/2010).

Expropriations of land for displaced persons and the simultaneous empowerment of the bourgeoisie constitutes a stark reality in Haiti. After 6 months, the UN and Haitian government have done little more than move citizens from one set of temporary housing to another. Verbal lease agreements with landowners leave new housing developments tenuous, while attempts to formalize the land title system—efforts undertaken by the OAS, for example, to create a cadastre system—threaten to further victimize those without proper legal representation and formal documents (International Development Law Organization).

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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.

To date, no plan for permanent housing exists for the current 1.9 million displaced persons. Moreover, massive relocation will only serve to exacerbate ownership and environmental problems, especially with improper use or overuse of land.

Land ownership should be the result of local planning which reflects the needs of Civil Society and long-term environmental stewardship. Towards this end, Haitian Civil Society Platforms are developing an alternative development plan that would be based on equity, justice, environmental sustainability and participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Displaced people must be relocated into permanent housing and must maintain control of their land for housing and work.
- Imminent domain procedures must be fair, just, and equitable.
- International donors should donate only to trustworthy environmental aid organizations that will ensure local, sustainable, culturally-sensitive redevelopment in Haiti.
- Haitian communities and civil society affected by land transfers and distributions must have access to some legal representation.
- Land use and land transfers should be transparent and must include environmental impact assessments.

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