

Building the bridge to a better Haiti.....

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When compared to the Dominican Republic, its next door neighbor, Haiti is still shockingly behind in all aspects of development. Its infrastructure is grossly inadequate, all the major institutions in shambles and the social fabric is disintegrating at an alarming rate. Overpopulation and high unemployment have formed a lethal mixture leading to abject poverty, prostitution and corruption. With every change of government since the Duvalier era, the hope and the dream of a new and improved Haiti have played into the Haitian expatriates' psyche to create the excitement of a "coming back home" frenzy. In the Haitian-American communities, many entrepreneurial organizers are disclosing their long term developmental plans and making projections for a brighter future for their beloved country. Almost always, this spirited air of optimism is quickly filled with the smoggy cloud of disappointment. The Diaspora is constantly searching for a leader to help them realize their much-coveted dream of a stable and prosperous homeland. The prospect of a new, different style of leadership created by the conscience of the majority has always remained a glimmering political goal of the Haitian electorate during the past four presidential elections, but so far, it has proven to be a wish as elusive as the legendary promise of a Santa Claus. Over the past 25 years, the country went from bad to worst in a presidential succession scheme that involves messianic messengers, Mandella look-alike prophets and cajoling demagogues.

Again now, with the new leadership team in place for close to two years, the promise of an all-inclusive politics is beginning to look more and more like a campaign slogan designed to win the heart and soul of the Diaspora, a blindly loyal component of the larger Haitian society, a component that is reliable in sustaining the economic life of a moribund country for the past twenty five years.. Until recently, the long-awaited piece of legislation about dual citizenship has essentially gotten the blessing of the legislative branch, but written in such a cryptic language, it really changes very little and manages to preserve the sanctity of the office of the Haitian presidency by keeping it out of reach of those who insist on maintaining dual citizenship. And the constant duel that is on-going between the executive and the legislative has been a paralyzing factor delaying indefinitely the much heralded, post-quake reconstruction. Facing with a leadership void, the country continues to operate on an auto-pilot mode allowing the passive proliferation of a large and unregulated NGO force that is both good and bad for a country where desperation and powerlessness make it vulnerable to any unscrupulous operation. Without question, the philanthropic arm of these NGOs has lifted the country from the precipice of doom to a much manageable state of recovery, but the open-ended aspect of their mission in Haiti does have the unintended effect of instituting a culture of mendacity largely perpetuated by the deep and powerful purse of the international community. With a Haitian national budget built substantially on donations, no wonder Canada finds it convenient to tag charitable aid to unrestricted exploitation of the country's mines. A painful reminder that "he who gives always rules". This can certainly be applied to all friendly countries that often use generosity as an entry key to a weaker country's back door giving them unimpeded access to its often buried treasures or other concealed natural resources. It is well known on the international stage as the "Aid trap" phenomenon.

As we start a new year, we can now reflect back on the road traveled so far where a number of missteps have led us to a series of costly blunders . We can then use our experience of these past failures to build a much stronger foundation to turn our dream of a better Haiti into a brand new reality.

From both sides of the Ocean, we can find plenty of blames to go around. It is an undisputable fact that the Diaspora still contributes heavily to the Haitian economy. However, the notion that Haiti relies solely on the Diaspora for a sustained development is a bit pretentious and can potentially hamper collaboration by fanning the flame of polarization between the large body of expatriates , judged less patriotic for having left the country when the "going was rough and tough" and the so-called "true Haitian nationals" for having the courage to stay and help heal the wounds of their battered country. Obviously, it is a fairly simplistic argument that is subject to many counterpoints, but this is not the purpose of this discussion. Conversely, the idea that somehow there is a concerted effort on the part of the Haitian nationals to keep the members of the Diaspora at bay is being overblown by isolated acts of xenophobic reaction on the part of a few insecure, homegrown professionals whose lack of experience on the international scene is bound to be accentuated once measured against the certified expertise of his/her foreign-trained counterpart.

Let's now put our differences aside and make an assessment of our strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, unlike the Dominican Republic whose phenomenal development run over the past 25 years was triggered by only a few rich and famous members of its Diaspora, Haiti has instead a Diaspora that can only achieve this level of financial might by collectively rallying its scattered talents that represent cumulatively a much stronger and richer Diaspora. . We have very few independently wealthy Haitians in the Diaspora., but we need to consolidate our individual resources if we are to produce the same degree of developmental impact. The Dominican roadmap to the present developmental success started with the reputation and financial success of one its most famous son, its international designer to the world's movie stars and celebrities, Oscar De la Renta who implanted the first seed of a lavishly-built real estate development in what is now known as Punta Cana. Then came the likes of baseball Sammy Sosa and other famous baseball players who invested millions in their homeland real estate projects. These singly large capital investments created the framework for thousands and thousands of Dominicans in the USA, Spain and other parts of Europe to follow the road toward a massive "Homecoming" resulting in an avalanche of foreign investments and country developmental projects by groups of Dominican investors. Presently, the Dominican GDP is approximately \$47 billion as compared to a poultry \$7 billion for Haiti. The Dominican government tax and other revenues on an annual basis amounts to \$7 billion as compared to \$ 1 billion in Haiti.

What to do as proud Haitians?

First and foremost, we need to pursue a vision for change from the culture of poverty to self-sufficiency. NGOs should not be viewed as the means to an end. They were intended to be a band-aid approach to help with the basic emergency needs of a people afflicted by man-made and natural disasters. Endless prolongation of a period of aid automatically kills our ability to

innovate. Poverty therefore becomes an accepted mode of life. Over the years, we had no choice, but we now need to stop being overly dependent on annual allowances from the international community. This form of charitable funding comes with a heavy price tag that slowly erodes our autonomy as a nation. There are stiff restrictions on when, what and why to use these donated funds. In many instances, the donor nation retained the beneficiary rights of specific choice for the purchased goods and services as dictated by the terms of these donations. Hence, the principle of imposed consumerism by way of philanthropy is well embedded in most aid packages.

Second, take a break from politics. Presidents, prime ministers and legislators are public officials elected to protect our life, our properties and our rights to function within a safe and secure environment. We spend considerably too much time trying to gauge our civic duties with what's going on around the presidential palace. They are not elected to support our "entitlement" habit. We rely too much on government to provide us with the means to facilitate comfort for our daily life as though it is a god-given right. We built our beautiful private residences up in the hills of Petion-Ville and expect the roadway and its maintenance to be the sole responsibilities of the State. We send our sons and daughters to State-sponsored professional schools (Medicine, Dentistry, Agriculture and Law) without ever contributing a penny to those schools. And yet, in the US, we all pay for our state-sponsored education and comply with the payment of hefty property tax for the simple joy of living in a secure, clean and easily accessible neighborhoods. If we play by the same rule in Haiti, we undoubtedly will help accelerate the pace of progress in a country we all would like to finally take off. We all agree a national budget with no substantial government revenue and high fixed expenses is a formula for a weak and inefficient government. Without each of us lending a hand as part of our civic duty, the stigma of being the "poorest country in the western hemisphere" will continue to impede our ability to make forward progress in this highly competitive Caribbean tourist market. There are too many areas of opportunities, too many needs that remained unfulfilled, too many initiatives that can be developed for us to sit on the sidelines waiting for things to be perfect before we truly engage ourselves. We are all waiting for Haiti to suddenly become a tourist haven, a safe place to invest, a place where the infrastructure is totally redone, the streets are nice and clean, the people miraculously return to the farms and defuse the condition of overpopulation in P-au-P. We want the school system to revamp itself, the corruption to stop, the vandalism, the kidnappings and the beggars to disappear. And then and only then we will feel safe investing our money in this imaginary, magically transformed paradise that we all hope for. This is clearly an ideal dream that is so far removed from the realm of rationality.

What do we need now?

What is possible for all of us is to draw an optimistic roadmap and collectively transform Haiti, using its rich human and natural resources, from the poorest to the greatest. This is not an impossible dream, this is definitely a reachable goal. Let's not be discouraged by the naysayers who only see the bad aspects of the country, let's celebrate the small steps of remarkable accomplishments over the last several years. We may have our own opinion about the managerial ability of those presently at the helm of the Haitian government, but let us be

objective in our assessment. Cleaning a city that was literally strewn with falling concretes, littered with garbage dumps at every corner, with most public places transformed into clusters of flimsy tents, portable latrines all over and piles of detritus clogging the city's sewage systems was not an easy task. Obviously, Port-au-Prince is far from being back to normal, but there is a palpable improvement. Education may not have gotten the prioritized attention it deserves, but there is a noticeable change in our attitude toward underprivileged schoolchildren. Giving them free access to public transportation is an initiative worthy of great praise. Adopting a policy of continuity by acknowledging ceremoniously the new roads, new public constructions even though they were initiated under the previous administration is a display of public-spiritedness that we should support and not politicized. Even the usually negative international press has noted the slow, but visible progress from bad to better in a country badly damaged by a string of natural disasters, including the worst earthquake in the Caribbean, the lethal wrath of a Cholera epidemics and the chaotic aftermath of a contentious election. It is time for us to stop the path of self-destruction, let's reset and go forward from our accomplishments over the past 3 year to a much better Haiti five years from now. Never mind what political ideology you espouse. The fact is we have a stable government willing to work with us as long as we bring progressive ideas on the table.

In order of priority, a "country first" attitude is needed to bring together the different factions of the Haitian citizenry. No sustained development program is possible without a policy of inclusion. The substantial contribution of the Diaspora must be reconciled with the aspirations and the wishes of those who are bona fide residents of Haiti, our brothers and sisters who have endured the vicissitudes of life during the most turbulent era in the country's history. They are those whose life's experience will be dramatically impacted by any developmental change. We may import the greatest technological advances, but the environmental side-effects may be too costly to local cultures. We therefore need their blessings and their approval before assuming a Savior-like attitude.

What can the country do for us?

In exchange, the country also needs to be more accommodating to those private investors from abroad by instituting a more relaxed policy on financing. Loan subsidy, tax abatement and other inducements for job creation should be made available to those who are willing to switch their money from Wall street of New York to the main streets of their homeland. The government may not be able to provide capital, but can easily help in providing access roads, electricity ,water sources, etc.,.

We may still be on the course toward regaining our lost glory as a country. Politics aside, let's follow the examples of most other countries that incorporate their Diaspora into their national agenda. In my view, our Haitian expatriates are eager to cross the bridge toward the homeland. They have been amassing a cargo loaded with tools, heavy equipments and great ideas to help rebuild the land which, despite the passage of time, still magnetically pulls them inside to start the much needed reconstruction work. The sad part is that they have been waiting a long time for this reconnection and despite the repeated failed promises, the false starts, the missed

opportunities, they never stop hoping for an eventual return to the promised land where their umbilical roots are still deeply buried.

As time passes, however slow it might be, there is the reality of generational shift that may harbor a totally different vision for the future of Haiti. Our sons and grandsons, if not soon immersed in the cultural mix of the Haitian society, may cut all ties and therefore reject all patriotic values that their parents so passionately embraced toward their country of birth, Haiti. As far as the future Haitian-American generation is concerned, if the prevailing xenophobic attitude on the part of our politicians continues beyond the next few years, Haiti would become just another country with a mere ancestral tie with no significant sentimental value to them. That could be a major loss of opportunity for a country with a Diaspora that is now considered the most powerful group of Caribbean expatriates in North America. That would be a tragic end for a country that is now poised to be the next example of Israel, a small country, but a mighty nation propelled by the Jewish Diaspora using its strong political clout to influence the world policy in their favor. I have no doubt the Haitian Diaspora, given the same opportunity, will be Haiti's best chance for real comeback as the shining star of the Caribbean nations