

The case of Haiti: Lessons learned for the future of Democracy and International Development

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At first glance, we could think that for democracy to be effective in Haiti it might need different policy implementations than other parts of the world. However, the latest political events in Haiti could be a great source of knowledge to improve democracy for the rest of the world. In the following analysis, we will first analyze two different approaches, a top-bottom approach and a bottom-up approach for democracy to better understand a more functional democratic model approach in Haiti.

Democracy has been largely understood in terms of institutions and elections. In this context, democracy aims for a country to have strong institutions with mechanisms of checks and balances as well as citizens that have the right to vote for their representatives via a transparent process. We could classify this understanding of democracy as a top-down approach, where strengthening institutions and electing leaders democratically will generate a trickle-down effect to improve the life of its citizens.

Democracy may also be conceived as an abstract notion. We really do not fully understand how the operation of a democratic state affects our everyday lives. However, in the case of many countries, where political stability is almost nonexistent, where public services are scarce and/or a luxury, and where there is little or no tax collection, democracy commands government accountability. In a democratic system, the government's *raison d'être* is to deliver the promises made in electoral campaigns, including concrete results which enhance the every-day life of a citizen. Here, democracy is better understood as a bottom-up approach. Democracy in this sense is tangible because we can point to the results of an effective democracy not only by the quality of its institutions or by the transparency of its electoral processes, but by the efficacy of public service delivery. Democracy better serves us all through its effective provision of public services for the majority, resulting in an overall improvement of human development indicators that grow organically in a sustainable and inclusive political apparatus. Democracy in this sense can be understood as an organizational power structure designed to improve our daily lives.

This analysis proposes to rethink Haitian democracy in the context of a "bottom-up" understanding, with two main indicators of success: an effective provision of services and sufficient tax collection for a sustainable governance in the long run. In November 2016, the Haitian people elected Jovenel Moïse as President. He won the first round of elections by 55.67%, well ahead of his main rival Jude Celestin's 19.52% (BBC, 2016). Therefore, it would be difficult to imagine that since 2019, civil unrest and calls for his resignation started questioning his legitimacy in power which

eventually ended in his tragical assassination on July 7th, 2021 (Anders, 2021). Haiti is a case study for the world to recalibrate the evolution of the democratic model because, without effective tax collection and effective public service delivery, democracies will come under increasing challenge all around the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the need for effective public health care widely available to all. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for an effective government that is transparent, trusted, reliable, and stable, and which sets rules and expectations for the entire society. Crucially, it has become clear that in order to effectively combat a pandemic, the government must be seen as acting in the best interests of all citizens, rather than advancing a particular ideology or political party to remain in power.

Specifically, with regards to the latest political events in Haiti, the vacuum of power can be traced back to the founding of the country and a continuous and cyclical perpetuation of political instability thereafter - it did not start with Moïse's administration. However, the need to rethink Haitian democracy and governance, and particularly its relationship with international aid became much more evident at this time.

This analysis focuses on the following questions: What are the main lessons learned from Haiti for the future of democracy? What have been the achievements of international aid for development in this country? Relatedly, why has international aid not been enough to reverse the fragility of the state in Haiti? And finally, what are the new paradigms for International Development that we can extract regarding the recent events in this Caribbean country?

The layout of this text is the following. First, we will review the historical foundation of Haiti in the light of the social contract theory by Thomas Hobbes to better understand the current status quo. Second, a glance of Haiti's most recent indicators that point into the fragility of the state accompanied by a closer analysis into the nooks and crannies of the governmental apparatus and what it's lacking to create the conditions for peace and stability for Haitian citizens. Third, a comparison of Haiti and world democracies that aims for a conversational space between the lessons learned of what is happening in Haiti to nurture the advancement of democracy in the world. Finally, some lessons to reflect upon the international community role, latest developments on international development theory, recommendations and final thoughts.

Hobbes and Haiti: The foundation of a nation that has not achieved stability

Haiti has inherited, like nearly every country on the planet, the Nation-State model for its internal organization. In addition, thanks to the evolution of the global apparatus, Haiti has benefited from international aid. However, in spite of receiving international aid, Haiti has not achieved lasting political and economic stability. This analysis proposes to understand Haiti in the light of the social contract theory to get a deeper sense of the foundation of this nation and its challenges to find peace.

Thomas Hobbes, a pre-eminent political philosopher of the 17th century, articulated in his masterpiece *Leviathan* the need for a social contract where men are willing to sacrifice a modicum of liberty in order to gain security. In a state of nature, there is no government nor superior authority, he concluded. In order to avoid chaos, we willingly cede power to an authority in exchange for order and security. The election of a president as the head of the modern state is but one manifestation of this exchange in modern times. However, in the case of Haiti, the pact where the government obtains the monopoly of security in exchange for peace and stability has been broken with the recent and unfortunate assassination of former President Jovenel Moïse. After all, if there is no guaranteed security, even for the head of state, everyday citizens have surely not received the benefit of the Hobbesian social contract.

To better understand the latest events in Haiti, the break of the social contract, and the current status quo of the fragility of the state, we need to review the foundations of the nation. The birth of Haiti as an independent country has important particularities that have impeded institutional development and the strengthening of the state. Its original inhabitants, the Tainos, died because of forced labor by Spanish colonists. Later, French colonists brought slaves to the island to continue working on lucrative sugar cane plantations. Haiti was one of France's richest colonies, but this wealth tragically did not insure to the majority of its inhabitants. The Haitian revolution in 1804 made Haiti the first colony to become independent from France, but not without great economic costs. France extorted a crushing recompense for its losses following the revolution; this debt saddled the island for decades. Many contend that it was the crushing debt that wreaked havoc on Haiti's ability to establish itself as a fledgling nation. Later, Haiti did not fare much better in the years of the Duvalier dynasty. The clientelism that the Caribbean country experienced in the Duvalier years did not establish the necessary institutional foundation of a functioning state - and the vacuum of power has

been persistent ever since (Nino y Gonzales, 2021). In short, the Haitian state has not been able to consolidate itself since its origins.

A serious questioning of democracy arose after the tragic assassination of former president Jovenel Moïse. The Haitian democratic model revealed its cracks, revealing too clearly that it was artificially sustained by international aid. Social discontent foments throughout the nation. The state's persistent fragility in spite of significant amounts of foreign aid demands serious and careful attention.

Haiti in numbers: Indicators of a fragile state

According to the 2021 Fund for Peace Fragile States Indicator, Haiti is listed as "in a state of alert", ranking 13th out of 179 countries worldwide.¹ There are several signs supporting this high-fragility ranking. For instance, the government is not held accountable for the provision of public services to its citizens; in large part, NGOs and international organizations fulfill this obligation. Haiti also ranks last in terms of citizen satisfaction with the provision of public services inside Latin America and the Caribbean region (LAPOP Barometer, 2020).

Basic services such as drinking water or health services in Haiti are scarce, or considered luxury goods- few have access to them or they have a high cost. According to a 2015 report from the World Bank, only 24% of families have access to health services.² Most people drink contaminated water. Limited access to drinking water and sanitation services has accelerated the spread of certain diseases in the past. Such was the case of the cholera epidemic following the 2010 earthquake, which claimed the lives of more than 8,700 people, according to the same source³. The COVID-19 pandemic has only deteriorated these conditions. According to the 2020 National Phone Service report of LAPOP Barometer, there are: "widespread reports of a lack of quality public sanitary services, like drinkable water and trash disposal."⁴

In Haiti, the relation between the lack of provision of public services and the lack of political stability and democracy is relevant. According to the same survey, "about 2 in 5 are willing to justify a coup when the country faces a health emergency, and 84% are willing to allow the president to postpone elections"⁵.

Secondly, Haiti is a fragile state because tax collection is minimal, which makes it impossible to provide services to citizens. A poor citizenry generates a poor state, and accordingly the poor state manifests a scarcity of public services. This is a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle, and quite difficult to interrupt with lasting success. Finally, the most self-evident

¹ The Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index 2021 – Annual Report," Fragile States Index, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2021/05/20/fragile-states-index-2021-annual-report/>.

² World Bank Group, "5 Things You Need to Know about Water in Haiti," World Bank (World Bank Group, May 26, 2015), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/05/27/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-water-in-haiti>.

³ *Ib idem*, 2015.

⁴ LAPOP Barometer. "Topline Report - 2020 Haiti National Phone Survey," LAPOP, Vanderbilt University, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

⁵ *Ib Idem*, 2022.

indicator of the fragility of the Haitian state is the destabilization associated with the assassination of the former President Jovenel Moïse. To overcome the cyclical instability in Haiti, the democratic model as well as the role of international aid and NGOs need significant re-orientation and re-tooling. The government also must be held accountable for delivering services. Currently, the international organizations are filling the leadership gap. The role of the NGOs, although well-intentioned and relevant for the provision of public services, has had unintended consequences, such as debilitating the governmental structure. Institutions in Haiti are not adapted to provide public services for the majority. Moreover, there is no forecasted expiration date for the need for international aid and NGOs to provide public services.

The case of Haiti: Rethinking democracies internationally

One of the goals of this analysis is to rethink and reconsider the basic principles by which we measure the success of a democratic country using the frame of the Haitian experience. The Caribbean country needs a new form of organization and a new approach with more citizen participation for a sustainable political stability and less reliance on NGOs.

Today, ordinary citizens receive little to no reliable, effective public services. The streets of Port-au-Prince are crowded with the rubble of buildings that have not been rebuilt following the 2010 earthquake. Street cleaning is non-existent, and many streets remain unpaved, and do not feature traffic lights. Animals, such as goats and pigs, walk through the streets of Port-au-Prince and have garbage as one of their main sources of nourishment.

Internationally, the democratic model has seen great success. The triad of democracy, international trade and human rights, described in the remarkable book *Diplomacy* by Henry Kissinger, has generated improved conditions and progress never before seen in various economic and social indicators in the history of humanity. The high rates of international migration to wealthy and democratic nations demonstrates that human beings today prefer to live under democracies rather than more restrictive or authoritarian regimes.

Nevertheless, the current democratic model has its own weaknesses. These include the deterioration of the environment due to excessive consumerism, the disproportionate increase in the gap between rich and poor (within nations and at a global level, exacerbated by the pandemic), undue influence of money in the political process, and the economic imbalances caused by mass production chains that reduce costs with cheap labor from underdeveloped nations, to name just a few. Currently companies like Apple generate

more profit than the GDP of countries like Italy, Brazil, Canada, Russia, Korea, Australia, Spain, Mexico and Indonesia, for example.⁶

The particular flaws of the democratic model for Haiti are the lack of focus on restructuring of the social fabric that has gone through so many tragedies, the lack of internal dialogue so that all parties feel integrated, and lastly, the lack of attention to citizen participation and a bottom-up approach to rebuild the nation. The international community's unintended contribution to Haiti's many challenges has been to create a parallel government to fill out the needs of Haitians citizens without creating the conditions for a sustainable democracy.

While the basic needs of Haitian citizens are not being met, social tension will continue to rise. A new approach for democracy and international aid needs to be considered to re-articulate the social-contract between Haitians and the government in power. Haiti cries out for a reconstruction of the social pact with a humane vision that takes into account the suffering that its people have endured and the precariousness of current conditions.

For the world, democracies need to reimagine their core purpose, which is to make tangible improvements in the everyday life of citizens and provide peace, security and stability. If we only focus on strengthening institutions and the electoral processes without also providing for the delivery of effective services, it can easily question the need for a state that is unable to cope with the basic needs of its citizens, also questioning why do we even pay taxes and in the case of Haiti particularly, what is the role of the international community.

New paradigms for the International Development

International organizations have been fulfilling the role of the government in providing basic services to Haitians where otherwise we would see greater deterioration of the current conditions. Some of the main achievements of international development aid in Haiti are clear and tangible. According to the latest data from the World Bank, Haiti's GDP has gone from 3.1 billion dollars (mdd) in 1990 to 13.42 billion dollars by 2020, that is an increase of almost 450% in the last 30 years⁷. Likewise, the mortality rate has been reduced from 145 per 1,000 births in 1990 to 63 people per 1,000. Life expectancy has increased from 54 years in 1990 to 64 years in 2020. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), remittances and birth expectancy have increased. In the specific case of sanitation and drinking water services, international organizations finance 61% of the operating costs of the National Directorate of Water and Sanitation of Haiti (World Bank, 2015).⁸ In other words, international development aid

⁶ "Apple at \$2 Trillion Market Cap Tops GDP of Italy, Brazil, Canada, Russia and More!" The Economic Times, accessed January 28th, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/stocks/news/apple-at-2-trillion-market-cap-tops-gdp-of-italy-brazil-canada-russia-and-more/articleshow/77640249.cms>.

⁷ World Bank, 2021 "Haiti Data" (World Bank), accessed January 28th, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/HT>.

⁸ Ib Idem, 2021.

has made an impact in the country's development in multiple areas.

However, the country has yet to transition from a fragile state to a stable nation, nor is it able to provide basic services to its citizens in a cost-effective and sustainable approach; without tax collection or industry development, the nation cannot collect public revenue to become self-reliable. In addition, some unintended side-effects of the intervention of the international community in this country need to be revisited such as the dependency of international aid to provide services, a government that is not held accountable, and the deterioration of institutions due to a parallel NGO nation, so to speak. International organizations alone cannot build a Nation. Knowing the limits of the intervention of the international community as well as implementing new methodologies for better results could yield more organic and sustainable results in the long run.

Recommendations and final thoughts

The international community has yielded results in every aspect of Haitian citizens but is not sustainable. Some recommendations for a more sustainable role from the international community is to implement policy solutions for new sources of tax collection, increase tourism in peaceful areas inside Haiti and invest in local human capital and industries. Internally, there is also a need to reestablish the social contract by integrating everyday citizens as a key actor for innovative solutions, government accountability and generating conditions for peace and stability. Also, new methodologies in International Development which have a more bottom-top approach could help integrate citizens as a main actor.

The recent political events in Haiti have generated new questions about the effectiveness of international aid.

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⁹ Chambers, Robert. 2008. *PRA: Pathways, Practice and Principles*. Routledge.

¹⁰ *Ib Idem*.