

Commentary: The Diaspora - a tool for nation building

By Jean H Charles

The concept of Diaspora was created by the Jewish population dispersed all over the world after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire in 135 AD.

There have been several later forced dispersions creating their own Diaspora, such as the African Middle Passage towards the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States, with the enslavement of millions of blacks that lasted 400 years, with 20 million displaced Africans; the Irish migration to the United States after the potato famine; the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire from 1880 to 1910; the Chinese explosion after the Maoist Revolution; the Korean expansion after the Korean War and the Haitian migration that starts with the dictatorial practices of the Duvalier regime around 1960, amongst others.



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The Haitian Diaspora is as such fifty years ago today. We will look into the success stories of previous Diaspora to help shape a course for the Haitian Diaspora in building their nation and expanding the economy for the benefit of all.

The earthquake of January 12, 2010 has been a wake up call for the world community to look at the squalid style of living that the majority of the Haitian population was subjected to as they conducted their daily lives.

The countryside of Haiti, with its 565 rural hamlets, as well as the 140 small cities have no constant electricity, no running water, no sewage disposal system, no telephone communication, no decent habitat, no paved roads, no clean public markets, as well as an inadequate health system and a rudimentary public school education apparatus.

The sad part of this story is the Haiti people have in their hands an inadequate means of redress. The successive partial and general elections have been an exercise in futility and in corruption designed to seal deeper the status quo. The international community has often been an unfortunate incubator of that macabre exercise. The Diaspora has been stripped of any political muscle and draped with a social stigma of foreigners that inhibit its influence and desire to help.

The right question is how to energize the Diaspora so it might become a change agent to force meaningful welfare for the majority? This essay will look into the steps to be taken to make this change come about. I will use the National and Diaspora Committee to Save Haiti (PSSN) step by step process as well as my

personal observation and research in that area.

I will disappoint many by saying at the outset; from the reading of the literature in that context that very few countries have succeeded to change their culture from the outside. The Diaspora has been effective as a change agent when the home country government has taken the responsibility to energize its Diaspora to make it an effective partner in economic and social development. The only exception to that rule as been the State of Israel; It has been re-created with the strength of and maintained by the financial and the political support of its Diaspora in the midst of hostile behavior of its neighbors.

By contrast, the best examples of Diaspora-driven agents are found in Asia, the tiger countries that have experienced an economic boom have done so with their Diaspora but the leadership back home has sent strong signal to the Diaspora to return to the home country. China, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, India, Vietnam have all called on their Diaspora to come back home and rebuild their homeland. They have done so not with cheap talking but with funding and real power.

A first in the Caribbean, the government of Grenada has sought the World Bank's experience and expertise in putting some traction in the building of its Diaspora to bring about change and development in the homeland.

Its Diaspora unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is branching into all the units of development of the United Nations including the UNDP - United Nations Development Programmes - to seek assistance to make lives better for the citizens of Grenada.

Haiti after the earthquake of January 12, 2010 must embark into a new mode of energizing its Diaspora. It is a population of 3 million people with the financial and intellectual strength that can make a difference from the brain drain that occurred in the last 50 years. Haiti has one million people in the Dominican Republic, one million in the United States and another million in the rest of the world, in particular Canada, France and the Caribbean.

By contrast on the other side of the spectrum, the Cuban Diaspora might be the only one that has succeeded in facilitating the maintaining of a 50-year embargo against their homeland. The political and the economic force of the United States favored the lifting of the embargo, but no president dares to take the matters into his own hands unless and until he receives clear and convincing signals from the forceful Florida Cuban Diaspora..

The Haitian Diaspora has demonstrated its power four times before. On April 20, 1991, when the CDC labeled the Haitian people a genetic AIDS carrier, some 300.000 Haitian people coming from all over the United States literally shook the Brooklyn Bridge (my heart beats stronger with that remembrance) to register their displeasure to the authorities. The stigma was lifted the same evening. They have again demonstrated their power in a sustained lobbying effort for the return to the constitutional order in favoring the return of Jean Bertrand Aristide to power;

albeit he did not stay long thereafter, he was deposed by combined national and international influence.

The Haitian Diaspora has also proven its meaningfulness in the amount of remittances sent into the country. At 1.8 billion dollars, it is much bigger than the foreign aid. It represents 45% of the national GDP. It is, after Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, the largest transfer of funds to the Caribbean. Last, but not least, after the earthquake, the Haitian medical corps has proven its effectiveness by descending en masse into the earthquake stricken Haiti, healing the wounded and attending to the sick.

Will this Diaspora be taken seriously now in the national and international effort of recovery? I have not seen the clear signals. The Diaspora meeting organized at the OAS headquarters in Washington DC has been more perfunctory than substantial, the drafting and the elaboration of the final document was done in New York by the Earth Institute with minimum Diaspora participation.

I will again be blunt in my observation that, for the Diaspora to have an effective voice and hand in the reconstruction of Haiti, it will have to look for and sponsor one of its own who fulfills the criteria of citizenship and residency to become president and sell this candidate to the nation and to the populace. That government will energize the Diaspora to come back and reconstruct Haiti.

There are definitely two cultures in Haiti one that is comfortable with the culture of squalor in which the masses live and one that will not support that status quo for one second. My own father was named Chief Judge of the Civil Court of Port au Prince by the Namphy government after living in the United States for some twenty years. As he was visiting, and saw the deplorable state of the clerk and the records office at the National Palace of Justice, he took out money from its own pocket and told the chief clerk to go and clean and paint the office "before I get used to it."

I will use the PSSN as a guide but I will depart on occasion to provide my own research and empirical observation to shape a course for the Diaspora in helping to rebuild Haiti. I am advancing the following hypotheses in this essay.

1- The Diaspora's contribution must be country driven, not the other way around. To prove my point, Haiti would have been in a recovery mode long time ago, if the Diaspora had the upper hand in the policy making decision. The passion for each member of the Diaspora for the motherland is not only legendary but it is real and encompassing.

2- The contribution must be a *donnant - donnant*, giving=giving exchange. While the Diaspora is contributing, the homeland must also extend its hands in all forms of contribution at the political, social and economic level starting with resolving the issue of double nationality.

3- It must be a personal one. The decision to emigrate was a personal one; the decision to contribute will be a personal engagement. Each person has his own

personal obligation and his personal skills and resources that are distinct and different for the other. Yet organizing as a group with affinity connection will compound the resources of each individual.

In Haiti the Ministry of Haitian Abroad has been created in 1994 as a gift to the effort deployed by the Haitian abroad in facilitating the return of Jean Bertrand Aristide to power. But the Ministry has been without legal status and without funding. Its effectiveness has been characterized by the dynamism of the Minister that occupies the title. In fact the present Minister has openly revealed that he had to borrow money from the Ministry of Youth and Sport to travel abroad and meet its constituencies.

These are the steps to be taken to empower the Diaspora for market expansion and as a goodwill ambassador of the homeland. The Haitian culture and history is rich and strong. You just have to listen to and enjoy the admiration of any foreigner who has been in touch with the Haitian culture. We are proposing the following steps:

- 1- A Creole Cultural Institute in each one of the major cities of the globe; It will be a governmental and Diaspora high standard conceived and run entity with classes in cuisine, art, language and dance from Haiti. The registrants will pay a fee to attend the sessions to make the venture self-supporting and sustainable
- 2- a bank of exchange of grey matter run by the Ministry of Haitian Abroad who will have an office at the Haiti UN mission in New York and at the Embassy and Consular offices in the other cities of the globe to catalog the experts Haitian and foreign desirous of offering their skills in the rebuilding of Haiti.
- 3- A development unit attached to the Office of Business Facilitation that will advise the Diaspora on potential investment opportunities, bids, market offers in the infrastructure sectors, in environment rehabilitation and the provision of services.
- 4- At the Haiti Ministry of Justice a unit will be established to speed up the process of double nationality for all Haitians with a foreign passport. It will work with the Electoral board to facilitate immediately the registry and the capacity to vote of Haitian people with a valid Haitian passport.
- 5- At the Ministry of Haitian Abroad a contingent of social workers will be deployed to encourage Haitian residents to become citizens of their country of residence, to live as good citizens and to become a point of light for others to follow.
- 6- Those social workers will work with the private and public sector to ensure that the rights of the Haitian workers are respected, their human rights not violated and their contribution to the society well appreciated.
- 7- The Haitian consulates all over the world and the UN office in New York will be transformed into a home for Haitians people to discuss issues of integration, harmony amongst themselves and development at home.

8- Special attention will be given to the hometown associations to incubate their projects – Mexico has offered three dollars for each dollar invested by the Diaspora in their hometown -- the Haitian government through the PSSN project will accompany the hometown association from conception to finished project in each town and each hamlet of Haiti.

9- The retired, the senior citizens, the intellectually gifted individuals, the athletes, the children of the Diaspora, the Haitian people of high esteem abroad will be courted to return home or bring their personal contribution to the motherland.

10- The Haiti agriculture and production will be geared to satisfy the nostalgic needs of the Haitian Diaspora; organic produce grown in Haiti will be sold abroad with facilitation of the government in all the markets of America, Europe and the Caribbean.

11- Some of the Haitian interns who have profited from a free graduate education will be sent abroad with grants from the UN specialized agencies and other foundations to help in the development of countries in particular in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America to continue the traditional Haitian chain of solidarity towards others people of the world.

12- We will seek a way to express a sincere thanks with our art so well prized in the countries of the world that have assisted Haiti not only in the recent earthquake disaster but throughout the long agony of dictatorship, ill governance and a transition without end.

May I conclude with this poem from Angel Aloma, Executive Director of Food for the Poor?

*I cannot forget you Haiti
As I depart from your weeping shores
I steal your salty air in my greedy lungs
I smell nothing but the scent of your sorrows and suffering
The memory of your unique cuisine resides permanently in my
Mouth. Your sovereign soil deeply embedded beneath my nails
Home I am home ... yet you continue to haunt me.*

Note: The National and the Diaspora Committee for Haiti Recovery in its travels throughout the globe will stop at the Double Tree hotel near the JFK airport in New York on Sunday 16 May 2010 at 6.30 pm to share with and receive feedback from the members of the community their dreams and aspirations on rebuilding the earthquake stricken country. All are invited. (Caribnet)