

Social Capital and Governance in Haiti: Traditions and Trends¹

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The World Bank

November 12, 1997

Introduction

1. Haiti's poverty is clearly indicated by deficits in human and physical capital. These deficits derive from a long history of external and internal oppression, and a system of governance marked by profound deficits in social capital – the networks of norms and trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit.² A better understanding of Haiti's social capital helps clarify the social context of poverty and mechanisms of survival among the poor. It also points to policy issues that must be addressed by any serious effort to alleviate Haiti's poverty. Clear perception of Haiti's social capital entails grasping the apparent paradox that it has mixed effects on governance - some positive, some negative, and the fact that it is truncated - rich at the local level and weak at the regional and national-levels. The following discussion reviews these aspects of Haiti's social capital and the key constraints to the emergence of more representative and effective institutions of governance.

Historical Background

2. The seeds of today's stock of social capital were sown during the colonial era. At the end of the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue was the most productive colony in the world. It was also reputed to be the most violent. In 1804 Haiti emerged from 13 years of revolution as the world's first free nation of free men and women to attain independence from a European colonial power. Two distinct and unequal groups fought for freedom: a large number of newly freed slaves and a small class of free people of color – including wealthy former slave owners. The freedmen fought for political and economic freedom, but the slaves fought for personal freedom from bondage. These sharply defined social distinctions - where neither class assumed responsibility for providing for the national public good - set the stage for Haiti's evolution as an independent but deeply divided society.³

¹ A modified version of this text will be included as background information in the Haiti Poverty Assessment.

² These definitions of social capital and categories of social relations are drawn from Putnam (1993).

³ For a review of the history of civil society and governance in Haiti see Lowenthal and Smucker (1996), on local governments see America's Development Foundation (1996). See Trouillot (1990) for a description of Haiti's political economy, and Fass (1988) and Cadet (1996) for the linkages between the political economy and poverty.

3. Following the revolution, the masses of former slaves fled the plantations to establish themselves as isolated and independent freeholders while the elite went on to assume the reins of monopolistic political and economic power from the colonial French.⁴ In this context of an absence of positive state interventions and exploitative market relations, the peasantry devised new institutions and customs to protect themselves from the government, to regulate access to land, labor, and capital. Repressive social and political arrangements tended to foster growing rural impoverishment over time. The exclusion of peasants from national institutions also encouraged peasant society to emerge as largely self-regulating and defensive.⁵ These social trajectories continued unchecked for well into the nineteenth century, as Haiti's treatment as pariah state following the revolution left it isolated from the rest of the world. These conditions of geographic isolation, political exclusion and social polarization continue to define Haiti today, despite the emergence of small intermediary classes, significant internal and external migration and rapid urbanization.

Traditional Forms of Social Capital in Rural Haiti

4. **Social Structures.** The vast majority of Haitians have always been peasant farmers.⁶ Despite a strong sense of localism in rural Haiti, the informal social structures that govern rural life are not based upon a well-defined sense of community. Rather, rural areas are composed of dispersed homesteads that originated in *mawonaj* – the traditional peasant practice of maintaining a low profile, avoiding the apparatus of state, and establishing furtive agricultural units on the margins of society. In the absence of community structures, the basic building blocks of rural social life are the peasant household unit, extended family ties, and the *lakou* – the house-and-yard complex that is common to the Caribbean region.

5. Peasant farmers also seek out and nurture other ties and obligations including patron-client relations, fictive kinship (e.g. god parent-hood), and special interpersonal relationships. In so doing, peasants actively manage their networks of special ties as personal assets – a domain of social capital based on the norms of transaction and reciprocity.⁷ These relations are not necessarily among equals. They have both vertical and horizontal dimensions in terms of power relations. In any case, peasants make sophisticated use of complicated interpersonal relations to meet labor requirements, gain access to land, protect clientship (*pratik*) in the marketplace, promote mutual aid, assure

⁴ See Mintz (1974) on the “reconstituted” peasantry and the antecedents of peasant production strategies within the slave based plantation regime; Leyburn (1941), Moral (1961) and Farmer (1994) for historical origins and the early evolution of Haitian society, and Lundahl (1979, 1983, 1992) for economic history and analysis of rural poverty.

⁵ See Trouillot (1990), Barthélémy (1989, 1996a), Fass (1988) and Cadet (1996) on Haiti's political economy, the disjuncture between state and society, and the problem of poverty.

⁶ See findings and projections from the most recent national survey, the Enquête Mortalité, Morbidité et Utilisation des Services (EMMUS-II), Institut Haïtien de l'Enfance (1994/1995).

⁷ Managing these relations is complicated. This process is fraught with ambivalence and negotiation as expressed in common parlance through Creole proverbs, for example: *zami lwen sè lajan sere*, *zami prè sè kouto de bo* (distant friends are money in the bank, nearby friends are double-edged knives), or, *sòt ki bay, sòt ki pa pwan* (stupid to give, stupid not to take it), or, *men ale men vini ki fè zami dire* (give and take makes friendships endure).

protection from state authorities, and generally manage risk.

6. **Traditional Peasant Groups.** Although individualistic in many ways, rural Haitians have long organized themselves into various types of small groups that reflect a rich tradition of cultural invention. These horizontal forms of social capital are indigenous, autonomous, local, and specialized in function. They tend to have a democratic character and emphasize collective activities along horizontal lines among social peers. The groups are self-selecting, self-governed, stable and repetitive, and based on the rule of reciprocity. People organize specialized groups for well-defined purposes, such as entertainment (for example, *kontradans*), religion (*bann rara*), secret societies (*bann champwèl*), rotating access to credit (*sang*), and rotating access to labor (*èskwad*). In addition to these examples, there are other specialized groups, a rich lexicon of localized Creole names, and a broad range of local and regional variants.

7. Traditional groups are very specific in purpose, however, they often serve an important secondary role as mutual aid associations in times of crisis, illness, or death among group members. Traditional groups tend to recruit on the basis of family ties, geographic proximity, and peer relations. They may endure over extended periods of time – some for many years. Such groups are remarkable in that they thrive in a peasant social context that tends otherwise to be class stratified, individualistic, and factionalist.⁸

8. **Social Functions.** Traditional forms of social capital serve individual or private functions, but they have important social implications. Labor and credit exchange groups are important to rural economy. They have also proved to be a useful point of entrée for innovations in rural governance. Traditional women's groups have been very successful in managing sizable funds of rotating credit for investment in marketing. Field studies show that males who participate in rotating labor gangs are also more likely to adopt technologies, participate in other collective actions that supply public goods, and provide leadership in community affairs. In general, labor exchange and rotating credit groups in the informal sector are common antecessors to the development of formal community development groups.⁹

9. These fundamental horizontal forms of social capital are most Haitians first experience in collective action beyond the family. And, because these organizations are self-formed and governed, this is where rural Haitians gain first-hand experience in building trust beyond the family, collectively monitoring and sanctioning behavior, resolving conflict according to agreed upon rules, and leadership to serve mutual interests - the basic building blocks of governance.¹⁰ Kinship dynamics and other special ties foster the emergence of local factions and can undermine the emergence and effectiveness of horizontal groups.¹¹ These patterns of factionalism militate against the

⁸ See Smucker and Dathis (1996).

⁹ See White and Runge (1994, 1995) and White (1997) on labor exchange and the role of labor in collective action and management of social capital, and Smucker and Dathis (1996) on rotating credit and labor exchange.

¹⁰ See Smucker and Dathis (1996) and White (1997).

¹¹ See Putnam (1993) and Moser and Holland (1997) on the negative impacts of vertical relations on governance.

emergence of community solidarity built on a broad base of shared local interest.¹² Nepotism and unmitigated loyalty to extended family and individual factions have a long history in Haiti - most notably in their effect of undermining the effectiveness of formal institutions and democratic initiatives.

Grass-Roots Community Development¹³

10. In addition to traditional peasant groups, “modern” forms of peasant organization presently exist in much of rural Haiti. Such groups are defined here as secular organizational forms introduced by outside agents of social change such as community development agencies, missionary groups, or the Haitian government.

11. Between the 1950s and mid-1980s, peasant “community councils” were established throughout Haiti – primarily by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). During the waning years of the Duvalier regime, the government actively sought to control and politicize peasant councils. Vertical interference and old patterns of dependency on outside NGOs compromised the community council network. They tended to be dominated by local factions and central committees rather than by active member participation. Furthermore, they operated on the basis of a faulty premise – the existence of a local peasant community defined by rural military jurisdictions. After the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, most community councils disbanded.

12. Beginning in the early 1970s, parish priests and lay leaders initiated grass-roots alternatives to community councils. These reform efforts led to the *gwoupman* movement based on small groups of peasant farmers operating pre-cooperative ventures. Recognizing the potential of traditional groups, a growing number of grass-roots support organizations made concerted efforts to promote *gwoupman* as a means to transform traditional groups into modern development organizations – producer groups, cooperatives, and community-wide federations of small groups. In contrast to community councils, the *gwoupman* movement was firmly rooted in horizontal relations among peers, direct participation by all members, and small face-to-face groupings. There is strong evidence that retaining such traditional forms greatly enhances the success of grass-roots development efforts.

13. During the Duvalier era, the *gwoupman* movement had no legal status. The movement was vulnerable to persecution and political repression. The law on associations tended to reinforce the state’s power and discourage the emergence of independent civic groups.¹⁴ Because of the repressive political environment, the small group movement and other civic organizations tended to maintain a low profile, and nominal ties to outside agencies or church programs as a protective umbrella. This

¹² Numerous ethnographic and cultural studies of Haitian peasants include SACAD and FAMV (1993), Bastien (1985), D’Ans (1987), Métraux (1951), Herskovits (1971), Courlander (1960), Price-Mars (1928), Mintz (1961, 1974), and Comhaire-Sylvain (1961), and dissertations such as Murray (1977), Woodson (1990), Lowenthal (1987), Conway (1978), and Smucker (1983).

¹³ This section draws heavily on Smucker and Dathis (1996), and Smucker (1986).

¹⁴ See Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (1990) for a review of Haiti’s legal framework in regards to human rights and the rule of law.

protection proved critical to the establishment of a cadre of modern rural leaders who emerged from the private grass-roots reform movement to become active in the public arena during the post-Duvalier era.

14. The fall of Duvalier saw the advent of free speech and a free press. The second half of the 1980s saw an exuberant explosion of new and often ephemeral civic groups, political parties, pressure groups, neighborhood committees in urban slums, local NGOs, external NGOs linked to the Haitian overseas community, and rapid expansion of the *gwoupman* movement in rural areas. Numerous NGOs exploited this opening, adopting development strategies that strengthened local member-based organizations and improved their capacity to lead local development.¹⁵ In general, the past decade has seen an unprecedented level of national consciousness and politicization of common citizens throughout rural Haiti. Peasant organizations played key roles in 1987 and 1990 elections. After the 1991 army coup, the military government brutally repressed peasant organizations, and thousands of civic leaders went into hiding or to their graves.

15. The return of President Aristide in 1994 inaugurated a period of reconstruction and new growth among grass-roots organizations. Producer groups, neighborhood committees, and federated movements are now widespread, including regional and national associations of peasant organizations. In recent local and national elections, peasant organizations promoted their own member-candidates for office, and successfully elected peasant parliamentarians, mayors, and, for the first time in Haitian history, civilian councils of government in rural areas.¹⁶

Traditional Features of Governance in Haiti¹⁷

16. Haiti's apparatus of state originated as a highly personalized system of authoritarian rule based on vertical power relations centered on the chief executive. The Haitian state has had very limited institutional development, and few functions beyond power maintenance, patronage, and extraction of wealth. The Haitian state reflects its origins during the era of Napoléon – and the republican experiment by former British colonies to the north. The fledgling state experimented with both forms, and tended over time to retain the outer trappings of a republic with the inner substance of monarchy. The Duvalier regime created a variant on this system by defining the state as a dynastic republic.

17. Democratic innovation in Haiti presently confronts social structures that remain deeply polarized and sharply defined by class stratification. Despite recent innovations in governance, and massive popular support for fundamental changes in the system, the underlying traditional character of the state still persists. Overall, its solid base in

¹⁵ For example, in the Commune of Maissade, where an NGO began supporting local producer groups in 1986, producer groups have mobilized and are managing over US\$40,000 in assets and are administering their own credit, grain storage, and input supply programs (SCF, 1997).

¹⁶ On the relationships between peasant organizations, recent elections, and the new political leadership see Maguire (1996) and Smucker (1996).

¹⁷ This section draws heavily on a democratic assessment of Haiti (Smucker and Zak 1989), analysis of the political system (Smucker 1991), and a recent civil society assessment of Haiti (ADF, 1996).

vertical power relations has tended to be remarkably stable for the past two centuries. Certain persistent features of the traditional system shed light on the constraints and prospects for genuine change in local forms of governance.

18. **Intermittent crises of political succession.** Political crisis is a chronic feature of the Haitian political system. Of the 34 Presidents prior to Jean-Claude Duvalier, 22 were overthrown and 7 died in office, either via suicide or assassination. The political system is still struggling to emerge from the most recent crisis, the more than a decade of protracted turbulence since the fall of Duvalier in 1986. The period since 1986 was dominated by turbulent struggle for succession to power. A popular referendum in 1987 ratified a progressive new Haitian constitution ensuring civil rights and creating democratic forms of government. The last in a series of provisional governments held elections in 1990, and put into office the first democratically elected president in Haitian history. After the 1991 army coup, local democratic initiatives halted or went underground during a three-year period of repression.

19. With the return of civilian rule in 1994, Haitian governments have struggled with a limited degree of success to implement a policy of redefining the traditional role of the state and decentralizing government. In 1991, and in the years since 1994, Haiti has held a series of local and national legislative elections. In 1995 the Aristide government dismantled the Haitian army and created a national police force. In 1996 the reins of government passed successfully from one democratically elected president to another - perhaps the first peaceful transition under constitutional rule in Haitian history.

20. **Haitian armed forces as political arbiter.** The army has virtually always had the last word in succession to power. Dismantling the Haitian army in 1995 meant a dramatic change in the system. This change has not been ratified by constitutional amendment and there are continued threats from former members of the army and paramilitary units. Future democratic transitions could face threats from the national police, generalized insecurity, and growing access to small arms.

21. **Strongman presidency.** The traditional political system was void of effective checks-and-balances, except for the old political role of the army. The political tradition focused obsessively on the powers of chief of state – highly centralized, personalized, and authoritarian. Accordingly, the presidency has tended to exercise a virtual monopoly on power. The tradition is one of a government of men rather than of laws.

22. At formal levels, there has been dramatic innovation in recent times. Implementation of key provisions of the 1987 constitution introduced for the first time a formal distinction between the state and the government, and between the presidency and other centers of power including parliament and prime minister. The central government recently established local civilian government in rural areas, and initiated efforts to decentralize the system and shift government services out of the capital city. These are very significant reforms that broaden participation and diffuse the power of the president.

23. Despite these policy reforms, an immense gap exists between formal innovation and informal practice. Formal separation of roles is not matched by genuine dispersal of

power and authority. The office of president continues to be extremely powerful. The central government in Port-au-Prince still strongly dominates all other levels of governance.

24. **Urban dominance.** Rural Haiti has long been a virtual colony of competing urban elites. The overwhelming preponderance of power, budgets, and jobs remain in Port-au-Prince. Foreign assistance feeds this tendency in that a high percentage of expenditures are spent directly in Port-au-Prince or returned indirectly to the city – even for rural project activities.¹⁸ Greater progress has been made in decentralizing elected representatives than in deconcentrating public services.

25. People are well aware of the dominance exercised by Haiti's primate city in virtually all spheres of national life, and refer to the capital city as the Republic of Port-au-Prince. In general, the interests of local rural communities are still not well represented at national policy levels. There is continued high risk that new political structures ostensibly intended to channel local participation will instead replicate old patterns of top-down authority and urban hegemony.

26. **Political intolerance.** The traditional regime operated on the assumption that it must monopolize all power or fall from power. The notion of a loyal opposition was virtually unthinkable, and rights of expression were severely curtailed except during open periods between power holders.

27. Over the past decade there has been progress in this area, but the art of political compromise among competing political parties and social sectors remains underdeveloped. In practice, insiders seek to dominate, and outsiders stress partisanship over reasoned debate. Parliamentary proceedings tend toward interminable delay or virtual paralysis due to an inability to compromise and form working coalitions. Political parties tend to have a limited base of support among common citizens, stress personalities over ideological platforms, and focus inordinately on the office of president. Due to a winner-take-all mentality that stifles debate, rival parties have been unable or unwilling to remain actively engaged in the political process as a loyal opposition. A real forum for public debate on national policy issues is nonexistent. Consequently, common citizens tend to be deeply skeptical of all political parties and the process of formal democratization in general.

28. The return of civilian government in 1994 was accompanied by dramatic reduction in civil rights violations. Haiti presently enjoys basic freedoms of expression, press, and assembly. Nevertheless, there are ample human rights problems linked to the national police and the limited functioning of the administration of justice. Rights of self-expression cannot be adequately protected until there is institutional access to rights of due process.

29. **Predatory state and weak public institutions.** Traditionally, the primary function of the apparatus of state has been to extract wealth and extend patronage.

¹⁸ See Locher (1988, 17).

Neither the citizenry nor office holders have ever viewed the state as a disinterested provider of public services. In response to limited government services, foreign assistance – and a growing number of international NGOs since the 1950s – have provided a broad range of dispersed public services in certain sectors. Since the 1970s, a great deal of public and private foreign assistance has bypassed government channels entirely. This greatly strengthened the NGO sector, and fostered the emergence of local or national NGOs. The growing importance of NGO services over time created a kind of shadow government for public services such as agriculture, education, and public health.

30. Post-1994 governments have initiated reforms in public administration and corrupt state monopolies; however, there is continuing evidence of corruption and abuse of power as a common feature of government. Employment at all levels of government is based primarily on political patronage. Ministerial budgets continue to stress salaries with few or no program support funds. In general, recent constitutional governments have been far more successful at creating new laws and ministries than in enforcing the law, implementing programs or increasing services. Most services in education, health, and agricultural extension are still provided by NGO networks and the private sector.

31. **Absence of personal security in the political process.** Traditionally, active participation in politics or government has involved great personal risk including threats of arrest, injury, or loss of life. Despite dramatic improvements since the end of army rule, government personnel, politicians inside and outside of government, and in the broader community still experience grave problems of insecurity.

32. Haiti's recent democratic governments have not held past human rights violators duly accountable for their actions despite a significant government report, *Si M Pa Rele*, which documented political violence by members of former governments. The government-appointed Commission for Truth and Justice produced this report, but it has never been widely circulated nor acted upon in the form of judicial proceedings. Continued impunity for past political violence tends to foster continued insecurity, including criminal behavior by disgruntled former soldiers and officials who were demobilized but never disarmed nor prosecuted.¹⁹

33. The Haitian National Police (HNP) was created in 1995 as the first civilian police force in Haitian history. This force has committed serious human rights violations, and some members have been implicated in political violence. Human Rights Watch notes that there has been little progress in prosecuting police abuse cases in the courts; however, it does not view police abuses as motivated by official policy. In a notable breach with old patterns of impunity, the HNP has taken firm steps to discipline members of its force for misconduct, including firing police agents and officers. Police and civilians are clearly frustrated with the overall inability of Haiti's dysfunctional judicial system to prosecute criminal suspects.

34. Law enforcement in Haiti is marked by poorly trained and inexperienced police, growing problems in police-community relations and few police agents are posted in

¹⁹ See Human Rights Watch/Americas (1996), *Haiti: Thirst for Justice, A Decade of Impunity in Haiti*.

rural areas. There is a clear risk that continued police violations and the absence of a functioning judicial system could lead to levels of abuse and impunity reminiscent of past security forces. The mixed record of Haiti's fledgling police force and heightened levels of insecurity constitute a clear threat to the country's democratic transition.²⁰

Urbanization: Erosion of Social Capital and Increase in Violence

35. The degree of urbanization in Haiti is rapidly increasing, and urban centers are expected to double in size within the next twenty years. The rate of urban growth is three times that of rural areas. The primary focus of urbanization is the capital city and its environs. Over three-fourths of urban Haiti is concentrated in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area.²¹

36. An estimated two-thirds of the population of Port-au-Prince is concentrated in teeming slum districts – some as old as the French colony, others on coastal dumping grounds and the nooks and crannies of the city's ravines. The people of these areas are largely young, single, and rural born. One study of Cité Soleil found only nine percent of residents native to the district, and nearly two-thirds rural born. Single young people made up nearly half of another study of the district, and women in single parent families headed a third of households.

37. Economically, the informal sector predominates. In a recent study on housing, two-thirds of the residents paid rent for sites controlled by landlords who had taken over unoccupied state land, or lands vacant due to exile, political looting (*dechoukaj*), or theft. Recent studies show that gainfully employed slum residents derive their income primarily from the informal sector, petty commerce, and odd jobs rather than salaried employment. Access to water and electricity is also based on an informal sector outside the control of official utilities.²²

38. In terms of grass-roots organizations, there are numerous pressure groups, neighborhood watch groups, and block associations in the *quartiers populaires* of Port-au-Prince. In contrast to peasant organizations in rural Haiti, local groups in slum neighborhoods have not generally had the benefit of NGO support services and training. They tend to have a more limited base of experience as groups, and exercise fewer functions than their rural counterparts. Urban slum organizations are commonly informal groups of young people or action committees with no legal status or protection. They tend to have weakly developed internal structures. Most have defined themselves primarily for protection, and by confrontation and opposition to perceived abuse by power holders. The emergence of local defense committees undoubtedly reflects the virtual absence of public services and formal channels for local representation.

²⁰ See Human Rights Watch et al, January 1997, *Haiti: The Human Rights Record of the Haitian National Police*, and O'Neill (1997), "Haiti's National Police: A Mixed Record."

²¹ EMMUS-II (1995, 232), and Nations Unies (1990, 43).

²² See Barthélémy (1996b) for description and analysis of current social and anthropological dimensions of urban poverty; Fass (1988) for the most comprehensive and detailed analysis of urbanization and urban survival strategies; GTIH (1996) for recent socio-economic analysis of urban slums.

39. Urban slums are composed largely of displaced peasants. Many keep in close touch with home communities and have a foot in both worlds. Rural-born slum dwellers have tended to migrate to areas populated by friends or family members. Urban social organization in these districts is strongly influenced by rural points of reference; however, the new immigrants modify rural models for exchanging labor and credit, and adapt them to the urban context. Rural-to-urban migrants often come as individuals, leaving family and social networks behind. The rural stock of social capital and social controls tends to weaken as new generations are born to slum dwellers. Overall, the urban economy has an individualizing effect, and exchange is usually on a cash or credit basis. This diminishes the traditional role of labor exchange. Informal credit maneuvers and consumer loans are common currency, including pawnbroking, usurious rates of interest, and loans of short duration or for a single day.

40. Crime and violent crime have increased dramatically in urban slums. This is attributable at least in part to the weakness of social norms and civic organizations in urban areas, dire poverty, violence by military and police forces, and easy access to firearms.²³ Increased levels of crime in Haiti are also linked to other broad based societal factors, including invidious social and economic impacts of the international drug trade, and the inability of government and UN forces to disarm former personnel of the armed forces and paramilitary units. They also include generalized impunity due to dysfunctional administration of justice, a common pattern of violent over-reaction by police agents, and institutional weaknesses of the HNP including poor police-community relations.

41. By international standards, Haiti is not particularly violent; however, the notable rise in crime rates in recent times has shaken the collective sense of well being among all strata of urban society.²⁴ Two aspects of this crime are alarming to Haitians and outside observers: urban crime is increasingly violent and unpredictable, and it increasingly involves children. Furthermore, robbery and violent crime have become more common in wealthier neighborhoods that were previously well protected from such crimes. In the past, property related crimes tended to be targeted and limited to burglary. Today car-jacking, armed robbery, and murders are much more common. Criminals increasingly use children to carry out crimes such as car theft and burglary, and children increasingly perpetrate their own crimes. Guns are easily accessible for rent or purchase. Childhood prostitution – almost unheard of until recently – is now common in urban areas. The response to this rise in criminality has been weak. Government law enforcement is woefully inadequate. Only a handful of NGOs in urban Port-au-Prince provides services to street children or community efforts to address crime.²⁵

The Situation Today: Poverty, Uncertainty, and Injustice

42. Poverty, uncertainty, and injustice are defining dimensions of Haitian society. Poverty has been a pervasive dimension of Haitian society for many generations. It is

²³ See Police Nationale d’Haiti (1997).

²⁴ See UNTMIH (1997)

²⁵ See Chery (1993, 1994) for descriptions of the life of street children and childhood prostitution.

deeply entrenched and steadily worsening. The scale of Haitian poverty renders the poor majority highly vulnerable to contingencies, and fosters unmanageable levels of social and political polarization. In peasant Haiti, growing poverty is directly linked to population pressures and environmental degradation. Agricultural production is in decline. For most peasants, agriculture provides little more than a minimal base of survival. The situation is greatly complicated by the virtual absence of viable alternatives to peasant agriculture.

43. The second dimension, uncertainty, has increased drastically in recent decades, and especially during the last decade of struggle for succession to power. It has created serious problems of personal security, severely undercut the quality of life for most Haitians, and caused frequent disruptions in transport, market schedules, school calendars, and the few existing public services. Unstable market conditions have led to drastic price fluctuations, a devalued currency, and steep increases in the cost of living. In rural Haiti, the defining feature of peasant production is management of risk.

44. The third dimension, a pervasive sense of injustice, has social, political, and especially economic aspects. The quest for social and economic justice has been a defining feature of the struggle for succession to power during the past decade. Popular struggle to open the system to wider participation has met with brutal repression and internecine conflict among traditional elites. Current reform efforts have been slow to translate the rhetoric of change into tangible benefits in the lives of common people.

45. In order to survive, the majority of Haitians exploit their most important asset and their primary form of social security – their stock of informal social capital. Exploiting this capital means investing in and drawing down on their networks of social relations and obligations. In times of crisis, the poor majority quickly exhaust the economic value of their social assets if their primary ties are with the asset-poor.²⁶ The poor have an excess supply of labor – their only tradable asset. Therefore, investment in traditional forms of social capital is an important survival strategy. This strategy requires complex maneuvers to maintain good social relations, generate new stocks of social assets by incurring new ties and obligations, bank favors with wealthier individuals, and avoid conflict with family and neighbors. This survival strategy imposes intense pressures on those with assets to redistribute. In effect, it also creates a leveling mechanism that constrains the accumulation of capital.²⁷ In a context of growing poverty and declining sector performance, this social pressure poses additional constraints on entrepreneurs and economic growth in the small-scale private sector.

46. This strategy is not unique to the peasant community or the poor majority. Uncertainty and social risk are also important elements of formal sectors - both public and private. Government functionaries and middle and upper class Haitians actively cultivate vertical ties and remain fully invested in informal networks of social capital. Banking favors with friends, families, and adversaries is often prioritized over formal,

²⁶ See Lundahl (1992:396) for a description of how Haitians exploit their social assets to finance emigration and how emigration has become a primary mechanism for social security.

²⁷ See Foster (1965), the seminal work on the image of the limited good, and numerous reference to “crab antics” in the ethnographic literature on Haiti and the Caribbean.

official obligations.

47. The formal political system has never mediated the concerns and interests of the masses of citizens or the nation as a whole. Rather, political power has always been based on exclusion and privilege. The formal system remains unable to effectively negotiate conflicts or broker compromise. It tends instead toward extreme polarization, or repression of conflict. Consequently, if sociopolitical conflict ever reaches the status of negotiation, it tends to be negotiated informally, and often indirectly through third party arrangements. The constitutional promise of formal representation, and effective protection of the rights of all citizens, remains unfulfilled.

Summary Analysis and Recommendations

48. Haiti's endowment of social capital is an accommodation to poverty, uncertainty, and the absence of effective channels for mediating the interests of citizens in the formal sector. The informal system evolved to ensure social security and manage conflict. Traditional social networks continue to define behavior and social organization in rural and urban areas. Social assets serve as Haiti's primary social safety net for the poor and the not-so-poor – a hedge against the vagaries of political and economic shocks. Vertical linkages tend to undermine formal democratic structures. Horizontal linkages can reduce transaction costs for generating new structures of governance, and actively contribute to both economic and democratic development. This analysis leads to the following recommendations for policymakers:

- **Recognize that the informal social system governs Haiti, and efforts to reform or modernize formal organizations cannot be fully realized until insecurity, uncertainty, injustice, and poverty are significantly reduced.** Vertical and informal horizontal networks will continue to define social organization and ensure survival. Policies and programs promoting reform in the formal sector – especially government agencies – will be frustrated unless they take into account the intense social pressures on personnel to maintain a diversity of income sources, and privilege their network obligations over official duties.
- **Reform the legal, regulatory and fiscal frameworks to facilitate the formalization of civic groups, the free operation and expression of civil society, and the independent operation of NGOs.** Existing legislation and regulations constrain the operation of civil society. It is difficult for grass-roots organizations to attain legal status and rights protection. A new law has been drafted to clarify the relationship between civic groups, NGOs and the state. Although an improvement over previous legislation, this proposal largely continues the Government's heavy handed efforts to impose control over civil society. Given that NGOs continue to provide the majority of services in Haiti, the Government should seek to form partnerships and redefine its relations with NGOs. It should refrain from stated intentions to control NGO efforts, and should repeal its current proposal to eliminate NGO tax privileges. Government should also move quickly to eliminate onerous

restrictions on independent legal status for peasant organizations, cooperatives, and other grass-roots member organizations.

- **Avoid policies or programs that might discourage labor exchange, or other forms of reciprocity-based organizations.** Given the importance of these horizontal ties to effective reforms in local governance, policymakers should carefully consider the effects of all programs and policies that might affect labor exchange or other traditional group forms based on reciprocity and active member participation. The rule to follow here should be to “do no harm.” Employment generation projects and minimum wage laws are notable candidates for evaluation.
- **Mainstream program approaches that encourage the formation and consolidation of reciprocity-based organizations and the active participation of local organizations in all development efforts.** Past efforts to strengthen farmer organizations and neighborhood committees point to the positive results of this approach in attaining both development and governance goals.²⁸ When feasible, these organizations should be the active executors of their own projects, rather than passive receivers of requested assistance. Local organizations, and those emerging on regional and national-levels, should be directly incorporated in efforts to diagnose problems and design policies and projects. Although this participatory approach can be time consuming and require additional technical assistance, it is the only path to an informed and capable civil society.

²⁸ Outreach strategies with a proven track record of success in Haiti have built on the following practices which emulate traditional forms: a) small group formats based on small, self-selected, face-to-face participation by all group members; b) member access to group benefits on the basis of reciprocity or rotation; c) concrete activities and tangible benefits; d) equal distribution of risk among all members; e) direct financial investment of all members as stakeholders (Smucker and Dathis, 1996).

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