

A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO CONFLICT IN HAITI

This document is drawn from a full case study regarding the cumulative impacts of work for peace in Haiti, by Marie Pace with Ketty Luzincourt on behalf of CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice Project and in collaboration with the US Institute of Peace. The first section presents key points extracted from the full case, followed by a brief summary of Haitian history and an outline of key drivers of conflict in contemporary Haiti.

Key Points from the RPP Cumulative Impacts Case Study¹

Misdiagnosis/defining the problem

1. Haiti has often been **treated by multilateral, bilateral donors and NGOs as a 'post-conflict country'** yet "it is not a country that has undergone war - neither a civil war, nor a war with its neighbors - and it is a context where violence and conflict have become deeply entrenched in the fabric and politics of Haitian society." (p5)
2. The definition of Haiti as a 'post-conflict' problem led to the introduction of a major **DDR programme in 2005 without a political/peace agreement being in place**, without wider security sector reform having been initiated, and against a backdrop of rising lawlessness. The UN subsequently "spent two years struggling against the confines of their mandate." (p35)
3. "Haitians...make sense of the causes of violence in Haiti differently. These differences manifest in a variety of perspectives on how to address violence and political instability. **This in turn impacts assessments of what is working and not working**; what is complimentary and at cross-purposes". (p15)
4. "**Policies in support of decentralization have been consistently dismissed** in Haiti for political reasons. Are we willing to acknowledge and **question the biases driving development policy** when these policies may potentially be at odds with what is needed to bring about Peace Writ Large?" (p43)

Worsening divisions/diverting resources/disempowering local people

5. There have been development successes in Haiti where "entire communities" have been mobilized. But "**too often within communities, the criteria for making selections are either poorly considered, or not well communicated** to locals. This leads to jealousy, confusion and resentment." (p38).
6. In 2006, Cité Soleil became a 'no-go zone' leading to "about 100 local NGOs that existed, many of whom existed in name only, all competing for the same funds...this generated lots of conflict

¹ All page numbers refer to the RPP Cumulative Case Study: "Haiti's Fragile Peace" by Marie Pace with Ketty Luzincourt, November 2009.

and very little impact." Development has also attracted immigrants to Cité Soleil now known as the **'faux leaders'** (as opposed to the 'leaders consequent'). (p44)

7. Examples of **disconnects between locals and internationals...**"when you are hungry, what good is a road? We asked for houses and jobs."(p39) "Instead of building a road that will cost one million dollars, it is better to build one that cost \$800,000 and invest the remaining \$200,000 in the population. If you don't, then the road will not be useful." (p45)
8. **Focus on "quick delivery** of improvements in people's daily lives....ended up in coordination and bureaucratic gridlock...a moment of opportunity had been squandered..." (disagreement with this statement also cited). (p39)

Increasing cynicism on the part of locals and donors

9. Emergency programmes, such as those embodied in MINUSTAH's stabilization mandate, **fall short** "because they do not reach into the depths of Haiti's fundamental condition." (p17)
10. "Reconciliation as a (external) goal is treated at best with suspicion for wanting to avoid dealing with Haiti's most difficult issues of the past and present." (p19)
11. It is misleading to look at total amounts of aid that have flowed into Haiti, what needs to be taken into account is donors having "suspended, delayed, reduced, or reprogrammed aid at various moments." (p21)
12. Given Haiti's tumultuous past...the "habit of fear is **too often mistaken for a lack of political will (by external actors)**" (p47)

Opportunities

13. Has the earthquake **created opportunity for a national dialogue** including all layers of society in Haiti? What would it be about? (the political settlement/a new social compact/developing a common vision for Haiti's future?).
14. There is a surprisingly **positive record of engagement from youth, gangs and other 'at risk' groups** e.g. in Carnival Peace Brigades and civic fora ("as long as they did not bring their guns"). The challenge has been to bring such positive initiatives to scale.
15. Praise for MINUSTAH operations where **hard-line/'cleansing' strategies were avoided** with a focus on keeping casualties to a minimum and building confidence of Haitian people.

History of Haiti: the First Two Hundred Years

Haiti is a country of dramatically contrasting distinctions. Colonial Haiti was considered the pearl of the Caribbean, with a vibrant economy that produced half the sugar and coffee in the world.¹ Then in 1804 Haiti won its independence through the only successful slave revolt in the world's history. Haiti's distinction today is that of being the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with dismal socio-economic indicators and little political and social infrastructure.

From the beginning, Haiti has had a turbulent and painful history of political and economic instability, repression and violence. It was the brutality of the French colonial administration that led to revolt and to the fourteen-year bloody civil war for independence. Following independence in 1804, the young republic found itself with enormous economic burdens and challenges and without friends. Surrounded by slave colonies and slave-owning United States, Haiti quickly became an international pariah. France had demanded massive reparations for assets seized during the war. By 1838, more than 30 million francs had been transferred from Haiti's treasury to Paris, and the demands for indemnities continued, dooming Haiti to prolonged international debtor status from its beginning. 1838 was the year that France grudgingly recognized Haiti's sovereignty, with isolation from Haiti's hemispheric neighbors continuing until 1862.²

The Haitian Revolution gave rise to two distinct populations in Haiti: a small urban elite, who were mainly the French-speaking, mixed-raced Haitians who had backed the revolutionaries—*les gens de couleur*—and the vast majority of black, Creole-speaking peasants. Following the revolution, this elite, in alliance with the military, reshaped themselves into a mercantile class that quickly took control of what soon became an extractive state. Peasant agriculture was organized through an egalitarian system of small landholdings geared towards subsistence agriculture. The mercantile elite and thus the state derived their income from taxing the export of the peasant surplus, via customs houses.³ The structure of this economic division—reinforced by the cultural divisions—gave shape to the extractive, predatory nature of the state that has lasted into the present.⁴

From the beginning, the Haitian predatory state has functioned to fulfill the needs of its elite, while offering little to no benefits to the Haitian people. In his analysis of Haiti's political history, in his recently published book, Terry F. Buss succinctly illustrates the unstable, violent, corrupt, tyrannical character of Haiti's beleaguered political history:

Depending on how one classifies them, there have been fifty-five "presidents" of Haiti since 1804, when the country gained its independence. Of these, three were assassinated or executed, seven died in office (one by suicide), and twenty-three were overthrown by the military or paramilitary groups. Two—Henri Namphy and Jean Bertrand Aristide—were overthrown twice. Only nine completed full presidential terms. Thirty-one held office for two years or less. In 1946 and again in 1988, a military junta ruled without a president. Nearly all presidents either were military officers or were closely affiliated with the military. Throughout Haiti's history, many presidents have attempted to become rulers for life. Every president has exploited Haiti's impoverished people and its resources, for political gain or personal aggrandizement or both. There have been very few months in its history when Haiti went without a revolt, uprising, riots, political murders, or mass killings. During the twentieth century, the United States compelled five presidents to leave office.⁵

This history gives context to why the international donor community today classifies Haiti as a “fragile state”. By definition a state earns this classification when the government cannot or will not deliver basic core services to its people, especially its poor. It has been further characterized as a country in search of nationhood, and a country held hostage by the state. Buss further summarizes that Haiti has variously been characterized as a nightmare, predator, collapsed, failed, failing, parasitic, kleptocratic, phantom, virtual, or pariah state. He makes the point that in many ways, Haiti’s history can show it to be all these things.⁶

In 1915 a U.S. invasion interrupted nearly three quarters of a century-long period during which Haiti alternated between anarchy and dictatorship. The U.S. occupation of Haiti—motivated in large measure by a regional stabilization policy—did succeed in at least a temporary restoring of some order to Haiti, but left little other benefit. An overhaul of the military—with the creation of the *Garde d’Haiti*—allowed for easier suppression of popular revolt and centralized authority became more secure. While there was some economic growth early on, it was not sustained. Infrastructure had crumbled from neglect, and the vast majority of Haitians continued to live in rural poverty. As a military authoritarian regime, the U.S. example did little to alter the role of force in Haitian politics and lay the foundations for lasting political stability.⁷ Despite the authoritarian stronghold, resistance against the occupation persisted. In 1929 rioting was happening on a regular basis, which eventually forced the U.S. to pull out. When the U.S. abruptly did leave in 1934, they did so without preparing Haiti for self-government, as it claimed in justifying the 1915 invasion.⁸ Importantly, these nineteen-years of occupation left a dark imprint in Haitian collective memory that remains today.⁹ The occupation furthermore stands out as a central example of where the U.S. influence in Haitian affairs has not been for the better.

Ironically, the period from 1934 until the rise of Dictator Francois Duvalier constitutes a period of progressive politics and a moment of great political promise for Haiti.¹⁰ Within the context of several coups, military juntas and dictatorship, radical groups, particularly Marxists and black nationalists—*noirists*—emerged, succeeding to transform Haiti’s political culture and widened the political discourse. It was in this context, that a military-backed populist upsurge brought a *noirist* to power. The Presidency of Dumarsais Estimé (1946-1950) largely spelled the end of mulatto political domination, and give rise to a new Black middle class.¹¹ But, the promise of the many important social, economic and political developments during this period was ultimately doomed by the internal pressures from competing elite on the inside and from outside by a harsh climate of U.S. anticommunism.¹² Despite the economic and political advances made during this period by certain blacks, the grievances of Haiti’s masses remained largely ignored and unaddressed.¹³

Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier rose to power in 1957 as a *noirist*, championing *voodoo* and Creole chauvinism, and promising a revolution.¹⁴ His so-called revolution did nothing to alter the relationship between the extractive Haitian state and the majority of its rural citizens.¹⁵ But, it did achieve a reconsolidation of political and economic power into the hands of the new black middle class. The new order was enforced through a brutal campaign against his opponents carried out by armed militias—such as the notorious *tonton makout*—that neutralized the power of the traditional army, and occupied

the country in a reign of terror leading to a massive exile of Haiti's mulatto aristocracy who fled.¹⁶ At the height of the cold war, it was in his favor that Duvalier was an avowed anti-communist. The United States rewarded this loyalty by turning a blind eye to the human rights atrocities perpetuated by the dictatorship and by supplying him with military aid and other assistance.

From early on during the Duvalier era, the international NGO community established a presence in Haiti. Organizations such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service reached out to the poor with programs in education, health and nutrition. Relief and aid organizations were permitted to operate, as long as they stayed out of politics. In a state that provided virtually no services to its citizens, resources from bilateral and multilateral channels filled a gap. Relieving the state of its duty and doing little to augment the power of the poor, these growing flows of aid played a key role in reinforcing the existing status quo.¹⁷

Jean Claude Duvalier—"Baby Doc"—became president in 1971, following the death of his father. The young Duvalier came in with a commitment to an economic revolution that would modernize the country and address the needs of the poor. This promise, together with a decline in the abusive character of the country's security forces, led to substantial increases in the flow of aid. Throughout the 1970s multilateral and bilateral assistance poured into Haiti.¹⁸ USAID, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank alone gave nearly \$400 million to Haiti, largely for disaster relief and agricultural development.¹⁹ A decade later, Haiti remained the poorest country in the hemisphere. The main beneficiaries of Baby Doc's economic revolution—his "keptocracy", as it came to be called—turned out to be more or less the same who had benefited from his father's political one.²⁰ Disillusionment by the international community dovetailed with growing public outrage. The period between 1984 and 1986 was characterized by popular violence, described as "an expanding sequence of popular revolts".²¹ With U.S. assistance, the military ushered Jean Claude Duvalier into exile in 1986.

In the post-Duvalier period, a struggle ensued over who would control Haiti's future. Competing visions played out in slogans between those demanding elections and democratic governance, on one side—*Chak Kat Ans* (Every Four Years)—and recidivistic forces who countered *Viva l'Armee*, on the other.²² Between those extremes was a more moderate group of Haitian elites who acknowledged a need for reforms, but whose strategy for change aimed to preserve the traditional structure of Haitian society. The international community provided essential support to each of the three groups. But, given their deep suspicions of bottom up change, they favored the reformers who advocated a more careful orchestration of change.²³ Already in 1983 Haiti's poor had started to organize into self-help groups and community associations.²⁴ With the Duvaliers gone, Haiti's future was up for grabs and an organized grass-roots—representing three quarters of Haiti's population—aroused fear among those who envisioned themselves the target of mass rage. The army was charged with dismantling the officially disbanded militias, but this failed, arousing angry mobs that went out to kill known militia members. Events continued to spiral into chaotic violence.

An interim government, formed with the mandate to carry out elections, ultimately failed to balance the demands for and resistance to reforms. Strikes, demonstrations and unrest culminated, in July of 1987,

in a massacre of hundreds of peasants demonstrating for agrarian reform. When the army finally perceived they could not control the outcome of the November elections, they turned to election sabotage. Within a year of the ousting of Duvalier, the armed forces had lost the favorable reputation they enjoyed a year earlier. In 1988 Haiti saw three presidents come and go, as the military reconsolidated power. Amidst mounting U.S. pressure, President Avril fled to Florida in early 1990, and a new provisional government came in and—backed by strong international determination to keep the military at bay—managed to orchestrate an election on December 16, 1990 that was internationally recognized as free and fair.²⁵

Much to the horror of Haiti's elites, Jean Bertrand Aristide was swept to a surprise Presidential victory by massive voter turnout and a landslide of two-thirds of the popular vote. This charismatic priest turned politician had become the de-facto leader of a broad network of pro-democracy, grassroots organizations that he called the Lavalas—*the flood*—and “had captured popular imagination for its commitment to the poor, its outspoken opposition to government repression, and the possibility of change it represented”.²⁶ Leveraging his immense popularity, Aristide wasted no time in office to begin radical reforms that included a purge of the top military ranks, a revamping of government ministries and a proposed tax on elites. For the country's disempowered masses, this was an unparalleled time of hope and progressive change. But the backlash that followed from a fearful elite was severe. Less than eight months after his election to office, Aristide was deposed in a violent military-led coup d'état, igniting a new wave of violence and terror that sank the country into further despair.²⁷

Three years of brutal rule followed. The new dictatorship, under the leadership of General Raoul Cèdres, waged a violent crackdown on political opposition. State sponsored terror and right-wing death squads killed several thousand people and sent tens of thousands more fleeing into the countryside, the Dominican Republic and to the United States, where boatloads of asylum seekers began turning up on the shores.²⁸

The international community rallied quickly in defense of Haiti's first democratically elected president. This was spurred in large measure by an OAS commitment to the consolidation of democracy in the hemisphere. The strategy to dislodge the military junta was two-pronged. Negotiations and political pressures were leveraged on the one hand, while punitive economic sanctions were put into place on the other.²⁹ The impact of these sanctions was felt most severely by Haiti's poor, while they failed to loosen the grip of the military junta. Their second effect was to expand Haiti's black market and to foster an environment conducive to the growth of organized and unorganized criminal gangs. Finally, in July 1994, the UNSC adopted Resolution 940 authorizing a military intervention, and in September of that year, a U.S. led Multi-National Force (MNF)—Operation Restore Democracy—entered Haiti. General Raoul Cèdres and his regime quickly capitulated and Aristide was restored to power.³⁰

Aristide returned to office under the protection of the 20,000 man MNF on October 15, 1994. Supporters came out en masse to give a tumultuous welcome and sanctions were lifted almost immediately. But, Aristide had little more than a year left to serve of his five-year term. Haiti's constitution prohibits two consecutive terms in office, and Aristide had reluctantly pledged not to insist

on an extension of his interrupted five-year term. He kept this promise despite agitation among his supporters, and on February 7, 1996 René Préval was inaugurated in Haiti's first ever democratic transfer of power.

In 2000 Aristide succeeded in winning a second term in office, through an election marred by massive fraud and a participation of only ten percent of the registered voters. During Aristide's second administration Haiti was steeped in violence, as political factions and economic interests jockeyed for power. The country became ungovernable and the economy all but imploded. Aristide's government was never accepted as legitimate by Haiti's powerful elite. Ultimately, in February 2004, a coalition of ex-military, neo-Duvalierists, paramilitaries, economic aristocrats, and many of Aristide's once-loyal supporters overthrew Aristide in a second violent coup.³¹

In 2004, the arrival of MINUSTAH, the deployment of an 8,000 member peacekeeping force, and departure of President Aristide marked the end of another turbulent period and offered the prospect of a brighter future for Haiti. In 2006, internationally supervised elections for president, parliament and local offices gave Haiti a democratic government at all levels. In 2007, the UN crackdown on the criminal gangs that controlled areas of the capital, Port au Prince, and other major cities provided a rare period of peace and security. A window of opportunity opened that was seized by a wide spectrum of stakeholders seeking to consolidate the fragile peace achieved during this period.

In 2008 a series of crises severely tested Haiti's fragile recovery. In September 2008, four major storms—Fay, Gustav, Hannah, and Ike—slammed into Haiti with devastating force leaving over 800 dead and millions of dollars of lost crops and destroyed property. In April, a fifty percent rise in the cost of basic commodities sent demonstrators into the streets in several cities to protest the governmental failure to deal with the rising cost of living. Following the April disturbances, Haiti's Prime Minister received a no-confidence vote in parliament, touching off a four-month political crisis. The new Prime Minister, Michele Duvivier Pierre-Louis, was in the process of forming a government when Haiti was devastated by the storms.

The Drivers of Conflict

This brief review of two centuries of Haitian history provides some context for understanding the commonly given explanations for what drives contemporary civil conflict in Haiti. This section aims to give an overview of these drivers. In every case, explanations of what drives conflict and instability in Haiti point, to one degree or another, to the standard referents for developing countries struggling with poverty and instability: massive unemployment, weak or dysfunctional government institutions, a lack of public infrastructure, and environmental degradation.

The effects of Haiti's chronic political instability and the government's non-delivery of services has been crippling to its development. By every socio-economic measure, Haiti is in dismal shape. More than the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, it is among the poorest in the world. About three-fourths of the population lives on less than two dollars a day and more than half live on less than a dollar.³²

Between 1990 and 2007 the GDP per capita growth rate for Haiti averaged -2.1 percent.³³ The richest 20% of the country owns 63.4% of the country's wealth, while the poorest 20% owns 3.1% of it.³⁴ This distribution puts Haiti among the top five countries with the highest income inequality in the world.³⁵ Almost half the population has no access to clean drinking water one-third has no sanitary facilities, and only ten percent has electricity.³⁶ Less than half of the children attend elementary school and more than half the population is illiterate.³⁷ Estimates of the unemployment rates—given the size of Haiti's underground and informal economies, an accurate count is impossible—range between 50 to 70 percent.³⁸

In the descent by airplane into Port au Prince, the view out the airplane window is that of a stark, barren landscape that gives no hint to this being a tropical island. Haiti is an environmental disaster, ranking 141st out of 155 countries according to a 2004 Yale study that was based on the environmental sustainability index. Ninety-seven percent of Haiti's forests are gone, resulting in repeated catastrophic flooding. According to the UN Development Program's Disaster Risk Index, Haiti is one of the most vulnerable countries to natural disaster. From 1900 to 1999, as summarized by Buss, Haiti experienced sixteen hurricanes, twenty-five major floods, one earthquake, and seven droughts. Wood accounts for 70% of household fuel for the majority of Haitians. There has been excessive wood harvesting by private companies and poor public mismanagement of natural resources by the government.³⁹

Haiti ranks near the bottom on every system of governance ranking. In the World Bank's governance assessment, Haiti ranks in the bottom 8th percentile for government effectiveness and in the bottom 4th percentile for absence of corruption as compared to the rest of the world.⁴⁰ Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Haiti as the most corrupt country in the world in 2006.⁴¹ In 2008, it was fourth most corrupt. In 2000, a US official estimated that 90 percent of Haitian police superintendents were involved in drug trafficking.⁴² According to a 2005-2006 World Bank Institute survey, 91 percent of households, 87 percent of enterprise managers, and 88 percent of public school officials cited corruption in the public sector as a major or serious problem.⁴³

A country is classified as a "fragile state" when the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, especially its poor. By several indexes Haiti again, ranks close to the bottom. The index used by Fund for Peace gives its lowest ranking to the states that are the worst off. According to this index in 2008, Haiti ranked fourteenth most fragile out of 165 states.⁴⁴ The "weak state index", used by the Brookings Institution, ranked Haiti 129th on a list of 141 developing or transitional countries.⁴⁵ The independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank—using different measures—ranks Haiti as one of the twenty-five "Low Income Countries under Stress," or countries that are "characterized by weak policies, institutions, and governance".⁴⁶ A US based development professional with a long-time commitment to Haiti, described Haiti as a resilient society living within a non-existent state. Buss quotes Royal Canadian Mounted Police Chief Superintendent David Beer in stating: "We must not lose sight of the fact that there may be no aspect of Haitian society that is not in crisis. Haiti may be the quintessential example of...a fragile state."⁴⁷ These statements might appear contradictory—how can a society be resilient yet in crises and a fragile state? This illustrates one of the many paradoxes of Haiti: the people are resilient, yet social and government structures are weak.

Violence in Haiti is often explained through these dreadful conditions and circumstances. But, some will give more weight to corruption and the failings of the state as the root cause of violence and instability, while others will say that poverty and unemployment are the most to blame. Others still, would offer more nuanced explanations of what keeps Haiti locked in a negative spiral, calling for the need to mend the fragmented social fabric of Haitian society. How people make sense of conflict and violence in Haiti—both in causal terms and historically—shapes how they answer questions about the cumulative impacts of peace practices.

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