



[Oscar Leiva/Silverlight for CRS]

Restoring Peace and Stability in Haiti

CRS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT IN HAITI

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Background

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) presents a fresh opportunity for the United States government to rethink its basic assumptions, strategies, and implementation efforts around global conflict prevention and stability. The act helps our government to tackle the root causes of conflict and violence by mandating an inter-agency strategy (among the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Defense) to coordinate stabilization activities in priority countries and regions around the world, including Haiti.

For more than 60 years, CRS has worked in Haiti to tackle poverty, create more powerful and just societies, and help communities develop the knowledge, understanding, and skills to bring about desired change so they can drive their own recovery from the 2010 7.0 magnitude earthquake that devastated the country, and the subsequent developmental efforts. CRS partners with the Catholic Church, the Government of Haiti, and other international, local and community-based organizations to implement programs addressing emergency humanitarian efforts, education, health and social services, agriculture and natural resource management, disaster risk reduction, and partnership strengthening.

Snapshot of a Country in Conflict

The country of Haiti has experienced fragility and destabilization for decades – facing a continual cycle of crises and shocks such as natural disasters and political turmoil. Most recently, in July 2021 Haitian President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated, creating a complete power vacuum for a country already facing multiple crises -- including gang violence, natural disasters, food insecurity and major economic crises. As it stands currently, the national-level government of Haiti is effectively dissolved, with an interim President but no parliament or high court. As politicians attempt to cobble together an interim plan to lead to stable governance, the day-to-day life of Haitians continues to devolve.

One of the most powerful challenges facing Haiti is the proliferation of gangs, which was significantly exacerbated by the vacuum of government. Gangs exist throughout the country, though primarily active in Port-au-Prince and the surrounding area, and control and govern large segments of the country, taking the place of legitimate government. Conflicts and turf wars between gangs has led to the displacement of over 20,000 people and has caused widespread closures of schools and businesses. Utilizing invasive social media techniques, gang recruitment primarily targets young men, who largely seem to be motivated by a lack of opportunity elsewhere.

A further result of weak governance is low civic engagement throughout the country. These fractures in the countries' social contracts lead to breakdowns in horizontal (i.e., the strength of ties between members of a community) and vertical (i.e., the strength of ties between community members and their institutions) social cohesion. People are disenfranchised and do not see hope of government regaining power, or effectively providing basic services, making civic engagement less likely. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of destabilization as there is little to no accountability or transparency at any level of governance.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Operating Environment

Gang held territory is largely in the middle of the country and occupies several major cities, making it difficult for people without the means to fly to safely travel from one city to another. This applies to CRS staff as well, who must fly between project sites in the North and South. Further, as in other fragile contexts, CRS programs must navigate potential targeting by those in active conflict- in this case gangs. CRS recruitment for programming aimed at empowering young men to reduce their likelihood of being recruited into gangs must be done quietly and far outside the borders of gang territory.

Complex power dynamics also require implementers, governments, and partners to analyze and understand the state of play intimately. Weak government control throughout the country have made space for other forces to take their place – although not officially. As such, politicians and wealthy individuals make political and economic decisions behind closed doors, with limited opportunity for transparency and accountability. Further, these individuals are often driven by profit incentives that are benefited by continued conflict and the power vacuum.

CRS Program Examples

Catholic Relief Services operates a wide variety of programming throughout Haiti that could serve as positive examples when assessing where GFA can invest its time and efforts.

One example is CRS' program Enhancing Youth Livelihood for Social Transformation, or JEN ANGAJE, which supports youth in vulnerable neighborhoods. While the project began in the cities of Port-Au-Prince, Tesso and Solino, it is currently shifting geographic focus due to security and access constraints. This project aims to enhance entrepreneurship capacities for youth as well as strengthen their social and economic resilience. Through it, 100 youth have taken part in an entrepreneurship training, and many others have taken part in community service activities, meditations, mentoring sessions, vocational training, and Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC). The promise of this project is its holistic focus– rather than just creating jobs alone, it invests in the varying needs of young people, while also engaging with and improve the entire community.

Recommendations

The GFA implementation strategy for Haiti should focus on repairing existing cracks in society that allow gangs to continue their scourge, empowering communities to uplift and protect marginalized groups, and strengthening

governance at the local and national levels. The following recommendations lay out a roadmap for how this can be undertaken:



Work at both community and national level. The crisis in Haiti is felt at both the national and community levels – both of which must be addressed in coordinated, yet unique, ways. At the national level, through the GFA the US should leverage the diplomatic power and expertise of the State Department to empower communities to better understand the everchanging power dynamics and develop a governance system that centers democracy, rights, and governance. At the local level, USAID can use its partnership experience to promote citizens engagement in the local governments and civil society, as well as work with local leaders to strengthen governance, transparency and basic service provision. Further, the US must invest in stakeholder mapping and engagement strategies that take into account both formal and informal sources of power and authority throughout the community. For example, many wealthy individuals or members of the private sector hold a considerable amount of informal power, and therefore should be engaged in transparent discussions around collaboration for the betterment of the country. The US should engage directly through capable and accountable local entities to support effective, meaningful and sustainable humanitarian response and development at the community level. This includes continuing to tap into ongoing civil society engagement, especially with local and faith-based entities, who often hold a unique position of trust and access within their local communities.



Create systems and structures to enable positive opportunities for youth. As young people, and particularly young men, are being recruited into gangs, it is essential to cut off this pipeline by creating other attractive and viable economic and social options.



• **Invest in education and sustainable employment opportunities for youth.** Given pressing food security issues throughout the country, agriculture livelihoods present a strong opportunity for Haitian youth—although young people show decreasing rates of interest in such rural jobs. The US should invest in supporting job opportunities for youth to remain and/or return to rural areas to work on agricultural production activities. This would provide a unique opportunity to engage youth and bolster youth employment while also addressing food security needs. Additionally, there has been some success in investing in vocational training for more urban-setting jobs such as bakeries, catering, and entrepreneurship has been promising. The US can continue to invest in small businesses to generate opportunities, including supporting market linkages for Haitian-grown agricultural products. Furthermore, developing holistic and sustainable solutions for youth requires programming that includes the entire family and community, with the goal of generating a better social structure and environment for youth.



• **Invest directly in social cohesion programming, both at the vertical and horizontal levels.** Horizontal social cohesion programming should be aimed at enabling more tight-knit, cohesive, and supportive communities – particularly in rural areas and small towns – as well as addressing mental health and psychosocial support. Vertical governance should be aimed at increasing the capacity of local governments to govern and provide basic services, as well as empowering local civil society to hold government accountable.



• Finally, gang recruitment is often possible because of social media and mass amounts of **mis- and disinformation**. The US should invest in helping Haiti to develop more sophisticated ways of interrupting misinformation as well as in programming that combats it by providing positive and factual information through traditional (radio, tv, etc.) and modern (social media, WhatsApp) means.



Put transparency first. As the US moves to implementing the GFA in Haiti, it should seek to set the gold standard for transparency. Many implementers and partners have expressed confusion at the current role of the US – particularly when it comes to security and military efforts (or lack thereof). Through better communication and transparency about its plans and efforts within Haiti, the US can inspire confidence which will allow it greater access and support from citizens down the line.