



**Civic Service  
for a Better Haiti**

Sevis Civik Pou Ayiti Vin Pi Bel

# Haitian National Civic Service

Global and Regional Perspectives



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**“We can improve our economic future, provide an opportunity for Haitians to contribute to rebuilding the country, and restore our dignity and ownership of Haiti’s future through civic service.”**

Leslie Voltaire



Since at least 2007, Haitian authorities and representatives of civil society have discussed the concept of national civic service for young people. All agree that it could be an important means to rebuild Haiti through dignified and productive labor. A successful Haitian Civic Service (HCS) program should be managed by Haitians for Haitians. Now, more than ever, it is time for the idea to lift off.

### What are the objectives?

A national [Haitian Civic Service](#) program would recruit youth<sup>2</sup> and put them to productive work. Overseen by Haitian authorities, the initiative would feature two objectives:

- (1) provide meaningful civic and vocational training, basic education, leadership skills, and discipline; and
- (2) stimulate employment and encourage the restoration of economic and community infrastructure and support for environmental rehabilitation.

The HCS could promote post-earthquake reconstruction together with a national disaster mitigation and response capacity. The initiative would initially be piloted in selected areas from 2010 to 2012 and progressively scaled up to at least 100,000 members by 2020.

### How could it be organized?

Legal provisions for an HCS are already set out in [Article 52-3 of the Haitian Constitution](#). There are also *de facto* precedents for an HCS in Haiti (e.g., a community protection brigade and civic action groups).

The [Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action](#) and/or the [President/Prime Minister’s Office](#) could play a role overseeing the HCS. If required, the government could also designate a lead agency to contract out screening, recruitment, training, management, and supervision of the activities of the HCS on an interim basis.

HCS members could be recruited from both [urban and rural locales](#) to work together for a period of up to [12 months](#). The program could also include persons displaced and spontaneously settled by the recent earthquake.

### How could it be managed?

The HCS could be shaped around a core group of highly trained members and sub-units focused on key activities. Committed broadly to reconstruction, rehabilitation, and renewal, the core group could consist of a specialized group of roughly [500–1,000 trained](#) members.

The HCS could rapidly form sub-units addressing specialized themes such as [community safety, disaster response, civic mediation, and civic education](#).<sup>3</sup> Depending on the level of government and donor support, a target of some [100,000 or more members by 2020](#) is not unrealistic.

The HCS could feature [clear and transparent principles of membership, training, and discipline](#). Moreover, the HCS could provide room and board. All recruits would receive work uniforms, appropriate equipment, and health care services. HCS members themselves could construct the shelter and accommodation facilities.<sup>4</sup>

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HCS recruits could be provided **monthly remuneration**, fixed at minimum wage or lower. Recruits would be encouraged to pursue **productive asset-building strategies**.<sup>5</sup> All new recruits would be put through an intense and rigorous training program. Participants would receive **literacy and numeracy instruction and other skills development** on a rolling basis.

All participants would abide by a code of conduct that would include clearly stipulated disciplinary measures. On **completion of service after 12 months**, HCS members could receive formal certification and a modest readjustment allowance together with support for employment placement.

### **What are the global experiences?**

Civic service programs have been launched worldwide by governments, private agencies, and multilateral entities since the beginning of the twentieth century. There are examples of civic services in at least **50 countries** across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Western Europe, and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Many initiatives emphasize the engagement of **young men and women**. Multilateral and bilateral agencies support civic service and youth programs alike. The envisaged HCS is therefore set within a genuine global trend in civic service.

Most civic service entities are designed to accelerate social and economic development. Likewise, more than three-quarters of all civic service initiatives include youth on a full-time basis as members.<sup>7</sup> These efforts tend to promote **employment, education, and skills development among civic service members**. They also **invest in targeted community development** in vulnerable areas.

In practical terms, the principle function of these voluntary civic service initiatives<sup>8</sup> is to **provide work opportunities** for a large untapped labor pool of young unemployed. A parallel function is to enable young people to acquire valuable, practical on-site training and basic education. At a minimum, this keeps youth off the streets and out of trouble.

All civic service initiatives are expected to **inculcate a public service ethos** among their members. By contributing to the rebuilding of a country's resource base and addressing its infrastructure needs, a civic service is intended to restore dignity through work while reducing social service deficits.

There is a **great diversity of civic and youth service programs** around the world. Most programs emphasize training, employment, and community development as overarching goals. Participants frequently serve between 7 and 12 months and are selected on the basis of age and from among unemployed or under-employed groups. Many recruits receive literacy and vocational training education (up to 6 months) so that they can teach basic skills.

In contexts where national development is tied to decentralization and agricultural growth strategies, civic service initiatives train recruits to **settle new villages and promote the adoption of agricultural innovations**. In order to encourage graduates to invest in rural areas, services, subsidies, and special incentives are often provided to former members. Specialized training may also be offered in key areas.

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## What is the Latin American and the Caribbean experience?

Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a **massive growth** of civic and youth service programs in the **Latin American and Caribbean region**. A review of several hundred such programs suggests that civic service initiatives are frequently both nationally and locally based.<sup>9</sup>

Such initiatives are seldom managed exclusively or even partially by governments.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, over 90 per cent of **volunteer civic service and youth organizations** are managed by NGOs, with far fewer managed by public or private actors.<sup>11</sup>

The goals of these programs frequently emphasize **civic and social development of beneficiaries** and are focused on the development of youth as active contributors to society. Key priorities are educational campaigns, community organization, tutoring, mentoring and coaching, and other forms of service delivery. Most programs involve youth at all stages of project design, development, implementation, and evaluation.

Criteria for membership tend to focus on **age, skill-sets, and education**. Incentives for good performance include awards, certificates, recommendations, and in some instances, monetary reward. Virtually all civic service and youth schemes place a premium on sustainable recruitment and retention of volunteer youth.<sup>12</sup>

A major precondition of successful civic and youth programs is effective training and supervision. Early **investment in leadership and skills training** has tended to generate important dividends down the road. Likewise, ensuring that recruits are provided with adequate support is critical. In some cases, programs feature transportation vouchers and stipends, clothing, and some living allowances.

## How can risks be minimized?

While there is a long history of successful civic service programs globally,<sup>13</sup> such initiatives are **not without risks**. In some cases, civic service activities were launched soon after countries became independent from colonial rule. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm accompanying their development, it is also the case that expectations about what they might accomplish were inflated. In some cases, civic service initiatives became handmaidens of dominant political parties and political leaders and unintentionally associated with the military and police establishments.

To avoid these challenges and ensure success, it is critical that a civic service initiative is **adequately resourced, managed, trained, and supervised**. In the case of the HCS, a major emphasis should be placed on ensuring that it is designed by Haitians, transparently led, and professionally trained and features solid management systems holding the process together. Investment in leadership – including training the trainers – is a critical component of good performance.

## Endnotes

- 1 This note was prepared by Robert Muggah with input from Robert Maguire and David Dichter. Additional comments and suggestions were received from Amanda McBride, Margaret and Michael Sherridan, Jean Manney, Eric Calpas, Vincent Grammont, and Leslie Voltaire, among others.
- 2 The age and socio-economic profile of selected candidates would need to reflect Haiti's demographic and development standards. For example, the UN definition of youth is 15–24 while in other contexts it stretches above 35.
- 3 These specialized units could be assisted by a separate body responsible for assessing needs and monitoring and evaluation.
- 4 Research on the AmeriCorps, for example, demonstrates that outcomes are often compromised without careful and rigorous supervision and mediation. See <http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/>.
- 5 For example, recruits could be encouraged to send fixed allotments on a regular basis to designated family members or others. Likewise, funds could be matched through post-service awards. See also Eberle and Sherraden (1990).
- 6 See Stroud (2000) and McBride et al. (2003). A preliminary review by McBride and Sherraden (2004) finds that of the 57 countries surveyed, some 210 civic service programmes were distributed between North America (34 per cent), Europe (27 per cent), Sub-Saharan Africa (12 per cent), and Latin America (10 per cent), with the remainder in South and South East Asia, the South Pacific, and the Middle East.
- 7 McBride and Sherraden (2004) note that the most common eligibility requirement for service is age, followed by skill- or geographic-related priorities.
- 8 Where civic service programs have been made compulsory, they have been accompanied by political challenges, budgetary concerns, and practical obstacles.
- 9 See Sherraden et al. (2008) for a review of youth schemes in Latin America. See also <http://tools.ysa.org/downloads/modules/DisasterReliefModule.pdf> and Tapia (2007) for information on regional experiences.
- 10 Nevertheless, several countries operate services mandated by government and tied to university-level graduation (e.g., Mexico's *servicio social*, Costa Rica's *trabajo communal universitario*, and Brazil's *comunidade solidaria*).
- 11 Sherraden et al. (2008) note that supervision of these schemes varies – with 70 per cent involving paid management and 30 per cent overseen by volunteers. In terms of their profiles, they feature a 60:40 female to male ratio with an age range of 15 to 29 and over half completing secondary school.
- 12 Expectations of time commitments range from 12 to 40 hours per week and 22 to 52 weeks per year.
- 13 One of the most successful is the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the US during the Depression era.



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