



**Civic Service
for a Better Haiti**

Sevis Civik Pou Ayiti Vin Pi Bel

Haitian National Civic Service 2010:

An International Workshop



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The mobilization of Haitian youth for civic service is urgent. It has emerged as a priority of Haitian government officials and at the recommendation of leading social scientists who have examined the issues surrounding Haiti's reconstruction, workforce distribution, and social opportunities and challenges. On March 30, 2010, a number of representatives from the Haitian government, the social science research community, and major NGOs convened to discuss the ways such an effort could contribute to sustainable post-earthquake development. This document summarizes that discussion and its outcomes.



Background

The Haitian government must convert almost USD10 billion of international donor pledges into concrete interventions on the ground. In addition to promoting decentralization and reinforcing public institutions, Haitian priorities include the formation of a professional civic service and wider civic action activities. To advance these aims, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assembled more than 40 Haitian, Brazilian, Canadian, US, and Norwegian specialists to discuss the objectives, structure, and anticipated outcomes of civic service in post-earthquake Haiti.¹

The workshop brought together practitioners, social scientists, and policy experts. A broad spectrum of organizations were represented, from Haiti (Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action; UN Special Liaison Office; Prime Minister's Office), the US (SSRC, Clinton Foundation, AmeriCorps, HaitiCorps, Institute of the Black World 21st Century, Corporation for National and Community Service, City Year, Columbia University, New York University, Trinity University, Washington University), and elsewhere (OECD, Canadian government, Viva Rio, Norwegian Church Aid, Peace Dividend Trust).²

Discussion

The workshop sessions considered the purpose and desired outcomes of the gathering, the historical context of civic service, and the substance of civic action more generally in Haiti. The goals of the workshop were described

as threefold: (i) establish a solid international network of partners to generate substantive input for the Haitian authorities, (ii) consider lessons from international and especially regional (Latin America/Caribbean) experience with civic service, and (iii) identify practical strategies for mobilizing civic service in Haiti.

Participants noted how the antecedents of civic service stretched back to the New Deal and Works Progress Administration activities of the early and mid twentieth century in the United States. A particularly important entity was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which served as the foundation for later civic service entities. A review of the US experience highlighted the importance of "triggers" (for example, economic depressions and disasters) in enacting major social policies, the importance of well-resourced plans that are built around real needs and capacities, the way any federal program requires strong local networks, and the challenges of balancing short-term objectives, like employment generation, against longer-term requirements, such as meaningful infrastructure.

A review of international experience – including a dozen programs in Latin America and the Caribbean – noted how civic service activities come in a range of shapes and sizes. Participants were reminded how any expression of civic service is conditioned in large part by historical, political, and economic capacities and realities on the ground. Participants cautioned against overly ambitious programs and warned also of the risks of politicization. Intriguingly, more than 80 per cent of the regional programs reviewed were administered by non-governmental agencies, even if they

¹ The workshop took place on March 30th in New York at the Century Association. Thanks to Craig Calhoun and Robert Maguire for assistance in preparing this "Workshop Summary."

² A significant number of interested parties from both the public and the private sectors were unable to participate owing to space constraints.



were overseen, supervised, and supported by governments.

Substantive discussions of Haitian experiences with civic service (stretching back to the early 1990s but primarily since 2001) considered the many parameters of civic service. In particular, participants reviewed trade-offs required in forming an efficient civic service, including between (i) a membership and a public works focus, (ii) military and civilian orientation, (iii) governmental and non-governmental administration, (iv) voluntary and compulsory participation, (v) a national and a local focus, and (vi) paid and unpaid.

Haitian participants stressed how civic service is reasonably well advanced – with train-the-trainers (agent multiplicateurs) and civic actions (traffic support) already underway since 2007. Brazilian participants noted how “south-south” exchanges in the form of community brigades were generating important dividends in relation to environmental renewal, disaster relief, and education/training interventions. Participants were all agreed that challenges remain in Haiti – as elsewhere – with the scaling up of smaller local activities into larger national programs.

Lessons and Next Steps

Primary lessons and next steps coming out of the workshop were:

Tighten up definitions of civic service and civic action. Participants reviewed the

distinction between “civic service” and “civic action.” According to the Haitian government, civic service is overseen by public authorities and is designed to reinforce the integrity and credibility of national institutions. It is enshrined in the Haitian Constitution and is the preserve of the state. By way of contrast, civic action consists of a much wider continuum of activities ranging from Diaspora support and volunteerism in schools, hospitals, and community associations to other forms of social engagement. The distinction must be maintained.

Critically engage with terminology. The Haitian National Civic Service background papers³ and earlier debates on civic service since at least 2006 took for granted the expression “corps” as the mechanism and terminology for organizing prospective members. Owing to Haiti’s past experience under the Duvalier regime – and more specifically of repressive military and militia activity – there are legitimate sensitivities with respect to concepts such as corps, brigades, and other “groups” since they connote a potentially militant agenda.

Move beyond short-term job creation or voluntary service toward salaried, trained, and long-term membership. The workshop considered a range of proposals for civic service organization, and all participants agreed that any entity must provide meaningful and long-term options, both during and after service. Activities should focus on education and vocational/life-skills training but also on durable public works activities. There was a strong critique of cash-for-work and short-



³ See Robert Muggah, *Haitian National Civic Service: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: SSRG/OECD, 2010); and Robert Muggah, *Haitian National Civic Service: Options for Scaling It Up* (New York: SSRG/OECD, 2010).



term job creation schemes that at best offer temporary solutions and at worst contribute to wider manifestations of dependency.

Revisit membership criteria for civic service.

Participants were not able to determine membership criteria for civic service. While it was agreed that all Haitians and Diaspora must be engaged in civic action and technical assistance – including facilities for training and support (on- and off-line) – there was not consensus that civic service must be restricted to youth alone. The Constitution and related laws are themselves not clear. While the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action is currently moving the agenda forward, it was recognized that a wider cross-section of Haitians may be appropriate.

Invest early and build strong foundations for the long term.

The urgency of the situation in Haiti requires swift and determined action. But participants warned against reckless or short-term fixes. International experience suggests that owing to the way civic service can crumble early on or be manipulated by elite/politicians, states often don't get "second chances." All participants nevertheless agreed in principle with the need to establish a disciplined and well-trained civic service as soon as possible.

Don't shoot too high, but don't be suffocated by narrow pragmatism.

The mixed experiences of civic service highlight the importance of being realistic in expectations but also continuously striving to enhance efforts. A realistic plan might begin under Haitian government stewardship – with a number of ministries involved. It would be formed around a strong core, or nucleus, with a series of "regional antennae." Recruitment, training, oversight, and long-term planning might be supported by a group of NGOs. All members could wear common uniforms and be provided with standardized entitlements, including salaries and post-placement stipends.

Outcomes

The participants were keen to ensure that the initial goal – an international network – be sustained and nurtured.

It might be appropriate for the SSRC to send out follow-up communications/updates to workshop participants on related activities, including via its Web site and associated personnel focused on Haiti. To be sure, many participants will pursue additional projects/follow-up, including with the Haitian government.

The Haitian government has requested a short synthesis of lessons learned from Caribbean and Latin American experiences with civic service. A comparative 10–15-page summary of key normative structures, organizational arrangements, training regimes, management and human resource issues, and monitoring and evaluation metrics would be considered useful. The SSRC or OECD could support the development of such a paper for wider circulation.

The Haitian Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action has agreed to host a 2–3-day workshop in Haiti in mid May to review the management, training, and financing of a civic service entity. The Minister and the Director General of Programs will assume personal roles in ensuring that Haitian authorities from various ministries and line agencies are well represented. The SSRC and OECD will examine options for support, including for specific input to develop solid proposals for civic service for submission to donor agencies.

The Haitian Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action may wish to explore the establishment of a consultative committee of international and Haitian experts to advise on civic service from 2010 to 2012. The consultative committee could be made up of selected members of civil society and the donor community to ensure that a Haitian civic service benefits from the most up-to-date and empirically informed input available. Committee members would serve on an honorarium basis only.

