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## Haiti: A Republic of NGOs?

### Summary

- Concerns about the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Haiti's development have been present for decades. However, these issues have gained increasing prominence following the January 12, 2010 earthquake that destroyed much of Port-au-Prince.
- Historically, funneling aid through NGOs has perpetuated a situation of limited government capacity and weak institutions. Haitians look to NGOs rather than their government for basic public services.
- Following the earthquake, international donors have recognized the importance for Haiti's government to take the lead in recovery efforts. However, old habits die hard; the problems of government capacity and poor coordination of NGO efforts remain.
- Haiti's government has been criticized for not taking a more visible role in responding to people's needs following the earthquake. If projects implemented by NGOs do not match up with the government's priorities, the long-term success of recovery efforts will be undermined.

“The Haitian government may not have the resources to directly implement programs, but it does have the resources to oversee and coordinate NGO activities. NGOs also need to engage the Haitian government in order to ensure their work aligns with long-term Haitian government priorities.”

### Is Haiti a Republic of NGOs?

Estimates of the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Haiti prior to the earthquake range from 3,000 to as many as 10,000. According to United Nations Special Envoy to Haiti former President Bill Clinton, Haiti had the second highest number of NGOs per capita in the world.<sup>1</sup> The devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, highlighted the critical role many of these NGOs play in providing essential services in health care, education and job creation. However, in the aftermath of the earthquake, the crucial work of these NGOs was tarnished by issues concerning NGO regulation and accountability, most vividly regarding the adoption of Haitian children. Concerns about NGO oversight and donor coordination have been present in Haiti for decades. With the proliferation of organizations in Haiti, this Caribbean country has been called the “Republic of NGOs.”

### Funding NGOs Undermines the Haitian Government

NGOs often have greater capacity and more funding than the Haitian government. Fears of corruption have caused foreign donors to bypass the Haitian government and funnel financial and material assistance through NGOs. For example, in FY 2007-2008, USAID spent \$300 million in Haiti, all of which was implemented through foreign NGOs. These projects often had more money than the entire Haitian Ministry of Planning. As a result, the Haitian government had little chance to develop the human or institutional capacity to deliver services. The Haitian people have learned

to look to NGOs, rather than the government, for provision of essential services. Funneling aid through NGOs perpetuated a cycle of low capacity, corruption and accountability among Haitian government institutions.

One consequence of shifting responsibility to NGOs is the “brain drain” from the Haitian government to organizations funded by international donors. Private agencies are able to out-recruit the Haitian government by offering higher wages, benefits and better working conditions. The best-educated Haitians were often enticed away from working for the government, practically immobilizing an already-demoralized bureaucracy. Another consequence is that NGO-implemented projects often are not part of the government’s program and thus are not sustainable over the long-term. In 2008, the microfinance industry in Haiti was composed of 300 microfinance institutions, 240,000 borrowers and more than \$100 million extended in loans. Haiti’s government, however, did not pass microfinance or consumer protection laws, and did not develop regulatory authority, a credit bureau, or legal status for many microfinance institutions. As a result, individual microfinance programs were disconnected and dependent on external funding, rather than being institutionalized into a sustainable, permanent and coordinated program.

## What Relationship Should the Haitian Government Have with NGOs?

Last year at the April 2009 donors’ conference in Washington, statements by officials and NGO representatives indicated a welcome recognition of the importance for Haiti’s government to take the lead in identifying priorities and implementing programs. International donors promised to channel more aid through the public sector rather than through NGOs. At the same time, Haiti’s government announced its intention to play a greater role in setting priorities and supervising assistance programs. Following the 2009 donors’ conference, donors provided only \$40 to \$70 million of the more than \$350 million in pledges and continued to direct assistance through NGOs rather than the government. It remains to be seen whether the impact of the earthquake will cause donors to make good on promises made this year at the March 2010 donors’ conference to channel more assistance through the government.

Channeling funds and increasing Haitian capacity are important but improvements in government performance will take time. In the interim non-governmental organizations are doing important work in Haiti, and they should continue to operate there. Attention must also be paid, however, to the role and relationship of the government to these NGOs. Experiences with poor coordination and oversight have demonstrated the need for a government role in regulating NGOs. This could be expanded to include government supervision of NGO operations. The Haitian government may not have the resources to directly implement programs, but it does have the resources to oversee and coordinate NGO activities. NGOs also need to engage the Haitian government in order to ensure their work aligns with long-term Haitian government priorities. In the example of microfinance, NGOs filled a gap in the economy, but it was necessary for the government to pass laws, create the infrastructure and provide the environment for further development rather than perpetuate dependency on foreign implementing organizations.

Some NGOs have successfully partnered with the Haitian government in the past. One example is Zanme Lamaste, the Haitian-run arm of the NGO Partners in Health. Zanme Lamaste has been active in Haiti since the 1990s. Originally operating independently from the government, Zanme Lamaste recognized the need to partner with the Ministry of Health in order to improve the public health system and reach everyone in the rural communities. Now, every clinic built by Partners in Health is a Ministry of Health clinic. This partnership model is a more challenging approach, which

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief is based on a September 10, 2009 panel presentation and the views expressed on the roles of NGOs in Haiti during a meeting of the USIP Haiti Working Group. The panel consisted of John Chromy, vice president of CHF International, Rob Dressen, senior vice president of Development Alternatives Inc (DAI), Donna Barry, advocacy and policy director of Partners in Health, and François Pierre-Louis, associate professor at Queens College. Dr. Robert Maguire, associate professor at Trinity Washington University and chairman of USIP's Haiti Working Group, served as moderator.

involves dealing with national and regional representatives of the Ministry of Health, hiring local staff, and establishing a sustainable project that will be handed over to the government when possible. Public-private partnerships such as this are important to achieving sustainability in countries with low incomes, because there is such a great need for public services.

The March 31, 2010 donors' conference created a temporary joint Haiti Recovery Commission headed by the U.N. special envoy, Haiti's prime minister and a multidonor trust fund managed by the World Bank that pools money for big projects in Haiti and avoids wasteful redundancy. The conference's proposal to create a permanent Haitian Development Authority to continue this work should be implemented before the mandate for the temporary commission expires. This authority should be empowered to coordinate the work of NGOs, which should be encouraged by donors to cooperate fully as a condition for obtaining funding and support.

## Recommendations

- NGOs have a role in providing social services and have been active in providing emergency response in the post-earthquake devastation, but greater accountability is needed. Groups interested in working in Haiti should sign on to the internationally recognized NGO Code of Conduct ([ngocodeofconduct.org](http://ngocodeofconduct.org)). The international donor community should reinforce the Haitian state's capacity to regulate and coordinate NGOs, especially in the education, health and infrastructure (roads, buildings and reforestation).
- The Haitian government should increase its ability to track NGO activities by creating a database of NGO projects in the country. UNDP was working on establishing this database for Haiti prior to the earthquake. This effort should be resumed immediately.
- International NGOs must engage with Haitian NGOs and assist them in implementing projects. This will ensure a sustainable build-up of local expertise and strengthen civil society.
- NGO projects and donor funding must be aligned with government priorities. The Haitian government has made a considerable effort to establish itself in rebuilding the country, but if projects implemented by NGOs do not conform to government priorities progress will be not be sustained.

## Endnote

1. Daniel Trenton. "Bill Clinton Tells Diaspora: 'Haiti Needs You Now.'" *The Miami Herald*, August 10, 2009.



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