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“What it Means to Rebuild Haiti” Panel Event

Report



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Introduction

Following the initiative of the Haitian Coalition of Somerville, a panel of prominent local Haitian American scholars and community leaders was assembled to discuss “What it means to rebuild Haiti.” on April, 7th 2010. The recent earthquake has once again drawn the world’s attention to Haiti, but we know this tragedy is not the only reason for Haiti’s struggles. The Coalition decided to take the opportunity created by this attention to reveal and discuss not only fallen buildings and damaged roads but also deeper, long-standing problems: poverty, corruption and rampant dysfunction. Now is the chance to take on these issues and make the changes necessary to move Haiti forward. Rebuilding Haiti does not only mean constructing a new Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince but bringing structural changes so that Haiti will never be so debilitated by a natural disaster.

The aim of this panel was to begin discussing ideas for building a modern Haitian society, with reformed laws, better education and new infrastructures. The panel was particularly intended to address the importance of involving the young generation of well-educated and passionate Haitian Americans in this process, bringing their experience and knowledge back to their mother country. There was also some discussion of community development and international relations in the new Haiti.

Panelists Included:

Minister Edwin Paraison

Haitian government’s Minister for the Diaspora (Ministre des Haïtiens Vivant à l’étranger)

Peniel Joseph

Tufts Professor of African American history

Linda Martinez

Tufts Professor of Community Health

Sherman Teichman

Head of the Institute for Global Leadership at Tufts University

Jacques Dessin

Lawyer, Social Activist

Yvon Lamour

Guidance Counselor, founded Center for Haitian Creole Development

Patrick Sylvain

Professor, Writer

Report

I. Strengthening the Relationship with the Diaspora

Minister Edwin Paraison began his presentation by saying, “We are at the juncture where we have to do something,” highlighting the opportunity created by the earthquake to tackle Haiti’s long-standing structural issues, including the failure of the banking system. The Diaspora will be a crucial element in this process, a fact which he illustrated by saying that the Diaspora were the first to send relief money into Haiti via wire transfers to their relatives, and they began arriving in Haiti within two days of the earthquake, despite the chaos and broken down transportation systems. As relief efforts continue, the Diaspora have never stopped sending money and other resources such as doctors, nurses, social workers and clergy members—indeed, these were the first people to arrive in the wake of the disaster. Thus, the Diaspora “turned tragedy into opportunity.” According to M. Paraison, “The Diaspora cannot live without Haiti in their hearts.” Integration of the Diaspora, and cooperation in the reconstruction process, is crucial. The easiest way to integrate the Diaspora into this process is to give them a political voice by reforming the Haitian citizenship laws.

As it stands, the Haitian constitution grants citizenship according to blood, so that a child born to Haitian parents is a Haitian citizen, regardless of whether or not the birth takes place on Haitian soil. However, a child born to Haitian parents in a country where citizenship is granted by virtue of being born on the soil (for example, the United States) is precluded from having Haitian citizenship, because Haiti does not recognize double citizenship. This also means that Haitians who emigrate to other places must either remain immigrants or give up their Haitian citizenship in order to achieve citizenship in their new country of residence. Since a good number of Haitians live abroad, this prevents many people who identify as Haitian from participating in the politics of their mother country. This is particularly a problem in terms of education, since most Haitians attempting higher education are enrolled in institutions outside of Haiti. Thus, much of the country’s intellectual capital is wasted.

A reform of the constitution that would change the terms of citizenship law was to be voted on in February of 2010, but the earthquake brought all political activity to a stand still. The proposed reform measures have still not been taken to vote. Minister Edwin Paraison has been advocating for these reforms for 20 years and will continue to do so. With the voice and pressure of the Diaspora, change can happen.

II. Recasting the Narrative of Haitian History

Peniel Joseph, a Tufts Professor of African American history, is part of the generation of the Haitian Diaspora whose parents left Haiti because of political turmoil. As he put it, they learned Haitian history from their mothers but they have never been back. To Pr. Joseph, rebuilding Haiti means remembering Haiti as the site of one of the first Black

revolutions, and drawing strength from that tradition of activism and resilience. It is also necessary, in his opinion, to reexamine the narratives of Haitian history, looking at the good and bad, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Pr. Joseph also emphasized the responsibility of foreign powers in Haiti's predicament. He said "we [Americans] can't act like the United States has nothing to do with Haitian's poverty." Through imperialism, America and France have set up a system of structural inequality and domination that hindered Haitian development up to January 2010. In the process of rebuilding, the "United States of Amnesia" cannot forget their responsibilities to Haiti, and should act on them.

III. Using Human Capital in Haitian Communities

Linda Martinez, a professor of Community Health at Tufts, spoke briefly of her field experience in Haiti. She emphasized the importance of rebuilding Haiti from the ground up, recognizing the existence of valuable assets and expertise within communities. To rebuild Haiti, the most crucial resources will not be those sent in from over seas but those that are already present in communities across Haiti. Any efforts at reconstruction that do not take this human capital into account cannot be sustained.

IV. Remembering Mental Health in the Aftermath of Tragedy

Sherman Teichman, the head of the Tufts University Institute for Global Leadership, spoke briefly on the importance of mental health in the aftermath of a tragedy such as the earthquake that struck Haiti in January. He emphasized that relief efforts should be committed for the long-term, because this process will not be over quickly. Resources for internally displaced people and children in particular will be crucial in moving past the tragedy and into the future. One specific effort that Pr. Teichman spoke of was an indestructible soccer ball: given that many children's toys were destroyed by the earthquake, bringing them ways to keep their minds off of the devastation around them will be instrumental in their emotional recovery.

V. Sustaining Action and Facing the Truth

Boston Attorney Jacques Dessin stressed the need to focus on actual process of rebuilding Haiti and make it long-standing instead of appropriating blame. "We need to think of what we can do instead of simply blaming the Haitian government," he said. "Summer soldiers" and "armchair activists" cannot sustain the reconstruction process: short term will only go so far. Mr. Dessin acknowledged that rebuilding Haiti means understanding its history and both the positive and negative aspects of international intervention. But it also means that more practical action must be taken. 10,000 NGO's

were already working in Haiti before the earthquake. Reconstruction will require Haiti to redefine coordination of their services for more efficient action. “There must be a general resolve,” Mr. Dessin said, “to look in the mirror and see what we see,” the good and the bad. He is confident that Haiti can rehabilitate itself: as he said, “Haiti has a long tradition of sweating and working until we achieve our goals.”

VI. Decentralizing Thought and Government

Guidance Counselor Yvon Lamour began by reminding the audience that Port-au-Prince is only a small part of Haiti’s true problems, just as it is also only a small part of Haiti’s geography. Too much attention is paid to the urban areas and to the capital, in particular. He argued that less-developed areas should not be called “rural,” since the word implies that these areas do not need all the services that urban areas need. He cited the fact that most legal services, such as passport offices, are located only in the capital city, meaning that you need to travel for days to get them. After the earthquake the only point of access to all these services was severely damaged, and yet people continued to flood into the capital to receive insubstantial service because they had nowhere else to go. Mr. Lamour said that such disorganization has put the people of rural Haiti in a ridiculous situation.

Decentralization, by spreading the power, is thus the key to the process of rebuilding of Haiti. This decentralization must begin with a “decentralization of thought,” since most policy makers do not truly consider the entire nation in their work. “Rebuilding is in Port-au-Prince,” he said, “but building is everywhere.”

VII. Fostering Unity to Rebuild the Nation

Professor and Writer Patrick Sylvain was the last to speak and emphasized Haitians need to come together in order to begin reconstruction. He reminded the audience of a painful truth: Haitians cannot rebuild Haiti. But even if Haiti needs foreign aid, he said, Haitians must first rethink themselves as a nation. Otherwise, foreign aid would be used to reconstruct an inefficient and fractured system, and this absolutely cannot happen. Indeed, though Haiti has been exploited by France and America for many years, Haitians have “exploited each other to the bone,” and this is the legacy that needs to be overcome. For instance, Mr. Sylvain told the audience that though French is the official language of Haiti, less than 15% of the population speaks it. “How can you rebuild,” he asks, “if you cannot communicate?” French is merely a tool for the elite, including the government, to maintain itself and exploit the rest of the population. Government needs instead to be of the people and respect them. Reconstruction will require a united effort, and this effort should include the Diaspora, since most intellectual capital of Haiti is abroad (and mainly in Dominican Republic). “We must rebuild as one,” he said, “and the major rebuilding must start in the Haitian mind.”

Conclusion

The goal of this conference was to foster conversation between Haitian scholars and local community members, recognizing that any real solutions for Haiti's problems must come from within. In that aspect, this conference was a great success. It also succeeded in raising awareness in the Somerville community about the problems facing Haiti as the nation moves forward after the initial shock of the earthquake. Sustainable and effective changes must be political and social as well as physical. The earthquake has exposed the deep and real problems in Haitian government and society; to fix these problems, we must find and fix their root causes. This conference represents a successful completion of the first step toward this goal.