

Community Forum, “Haiti, Elections and Beyond: Opportunities for Democratic Cooperation”

November 20, 2005 - Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture

A Continuing Dialogue on Healthy Democracy in Haiti
Presented by the Haitian-American Community Dialogue*

Proceedings Summary

The community forum “**Haiti, Elections and Beyond: Opportunities for Democratic Cooperation**” was organized by the Haitian-American Community Dialogue (HACD) under the aegis of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The event is part of the HACD’s ongoing efforts to promote greater cooperation within the Haitian community in order for members of the diaspora to have a positive impact on the political, social and economic development of Haiti.

In keeping with the HACD’s neutral role, the forum sought to promote a constructive dialogue on issues that are crucial to both Haiti and Haitians living abroad without getting into partisan politics. The goal was to envisage a possible role for the diaspora in the long-term democratic development in Haiti, using the upcoming elections as a context for discussion.

The forum was framed around the “Principles of Healthy Democracy in Haiti,” a document that emerged out of recent community dialogues in an effort to define principles of democracy, pluralism and justice that can be embraced by the diaspora community to support positive developments in Haiti. (This document was distributed at the workshop and is available by contacting the HACD (see below) or at the HACD website, <http://www.afsc.org/nymetro/conflictresolution/CRHACdialogue.htm>).

About thirty (30) people attended the event apart from members of the HACD planning group. They were concerned Haitian expatriates from a variety of backgrounds, including community leaders and activists, academics, community media representatives, and other members of the community. Non-Haitians interested in Haitian politics and issues also attended.

The start of the forum featured three talented panelists who delivered thematic presentations on issues pertaining to the upcoming elections and on the diaspora’s role in the democratic process:

- Jean Max Bellerive, Director of the Unit of Coordination & Monitoring of Public Policies, GOH/UNDP
Topic: “The structure and current status of the electoral process, with special attention to the local elections”
- Michel Soukar: Historian/Professor and Journalist
Topic: “What should follow the elections in order to build democracy?”
- Gepsie Metellus: Executive Director of the Haitian Neighborhood Center, Sant La
Topic: “The role of the diaspora in the strengthening of democracy”

The panelists' candid presentations set the stage for an open discussion in which participants were invited to identify ways the diaspora could support democratic efforts in Haiti by answering two specific questions: 1) How would you modify or enhance the Principles of Democracy statement? 2) What are the next steps that the diaspora can take with the principles to strengthen democracy following the elections?

Below are of some of the **outcomes** of the participants' discussion:

- 1- With little reservation, the participants generally agreed with the "Principles for a Healthy Democracy in Haiti" and accepted the document as a guide for supporting positive developments in Haiti. Suggestions for improving the Principles included the importance of decentralization (giving local authorities more power and ensuring that services are available locally) and the need for constitutional reform.
- 2- Participants agreed that the community should be more organized and proposed that further similar activities or events be organized. Media in the community was seen as playing a role in rallying people around issues that concern them.
- 3- As a result of more community collaboration, Haitian expatriates can transcend their political differences and reach consensus on ways to concretely help the country move toward greater democracy.
- 4- Participants suggested that the diaspora should influence directly the NGOs or international organizations working in Haiti, so that these may appropriately respond to the needs of the Haitian people.
- 5- Participants proposed that the diaspora should offer logistical assistance for the elections in the form of material support and observers.
- 6- Participants identified the lack of know-how of most Haitian politicians and administrators/public servants as a major roadblock for democratic improvement in Haiti; they proposed that the diaspora finance their training, or that professional members of the diaspora provide them with training in their respective disciplines.
- 7- One suggestion was that regional diaspora organizations should be empowered to implement specific solutions in Haiti.
- 8- Another suggested course of action was lobbying for a constitution that would address the needs and concerns of the diaspora community, including dual citizenship.
- 9- A few participants expressed an interest in joining the HACD's regular meetings to be more actively engaged in the dialogue.

Given the great level of enthusiasm generated by the forum, the HACD plans to organize a follow-up community meeting to continue the dialogue and encourage action on recommendations from the forum. The HACD welcomes new participants. Please feel free to contact the HACD at the AFSC for more information: 212-598-0957 or haitiandialogue@afsc.org.

* The Haitian-American Community Dialogue was brought together with the objective of addressing the obstacles to building healthy and sustainable institutions in the Haitian-American community via constructive dialogue within the community. Informal explorations were undertaken in the fall of 1995 to assess the feasibility of the Dialogue. The program was formally established in July 1997 when the first Haitian-American Community Dialogue took place with a weekend problem solving workshop. The HACD is hosted by the New York regional office of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). To learn more visit our Internet pages at: <http://www.afsc.org/nymetro/conflictresolution/CRHACdialogue.htm>.