



Meeting the Moment: The Role of the Diaspora in Haiti's Future

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Haiti's diaspora needs to coordinate on key policy priorities to help stabilize the country.
- Remittances should be complemented with targeted investments in sectors that advance reconstruction.
- Haiti can also benefit from the expertise of its diaspora to build public administration capacity.

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In early July, Haitian Prime Minister Gary Conille made his first visit to Washington, where he sought to mobilize the Haitian diaspora to be more active in restoring Haiti's governance, security and development, as he pushed back against the "Haiti fatigue" that afflicts official Washington. Haiti's diaspora is an important asset to multinational efforts to address the crises the country faces today and could be a critical factor in building a sustainable and prosperous future.

But to achieve this, diaspora leaders need to prioritize sustainable initiatives capable of playing a decisive role in bringing relief to Haiti. The U.S.-Haitian diaspora can be a game-changer if:

- It unites behind a set of core policies and initiatives;
- Makes effective use of existing community engagement, political networking and a rich cultural heritage;
- Leverages skills and expertise in a manner that enhances Haiti's shattered educational, healthcare and governance infrastructure;
- Finds creative ways to supplement the existing flow of remittances with targeted economic investments; and
- Identifies mechanisms that more directly engage the diaspora in supporting Haiti's beleaguered government institutions.

An Untapped Resource

Haitians living abroad never hide their fondness for their homeland and constantly seek ways to help. With roughly [1.2 million](#) people, the U.S.-Haitian diaspora community is diverse and excels in many fields, including academia, business,

entertainment and government while contributing up to 30 percent to Haiti's national income through [remittances](#).

Unlike most other established diaspora communities in the U.S., though, the Haitian diaspora is much less organized and lacks a unified voice and strategic focus, impeding its ability to leverage its inherent power. This becomes even more noticeable when it comes to advocating for U.S.-Haiti policy, where the diaspora's political influence appears limited in contrast with other Caribbean diaspora communities — notably Cuban and Dominican — that play active roles in shaping policy engagement in those countries. Their success is not only due to an active mobilization but becomes amplified through sectoral alliances (business and trade groups, the arts or outreach to think tanks). With an accurate appraisal of its capabilities, strategic utilization of its resources, and a commitment to long-term solutions, the Haitian diaspora can shift the current paradigm.

Measure it Better to Leverage it Better

As a preliminary step to greater engagement by the diaspora, there needs to be an accurate assessment of the socio-economic and political landscape of the community. Last year, a collective led by the Haitian American Foundation for Democracy [surveyed](#) members of the diaspora to collect data as the basis to create a roadmap for the community's enhanced engagement. This work could be further built upon and carried out more holistically, not only to account for the community's social and political state of play but also to capture its assets and potential to influence.

The second step, and perhaps the most crucial at this stage, would be to conduct a large and targeted outreach to meet with key diaspora groups and communities to build a policy agenda. This could be the foundation for a baseline set of top priorities, in effect a form of consensus views that the Haitian diaspora would pursue across local and national channels in the U.S. and within Haiti. Without being overly

prescriptive, there are a number of initiatives currently on the table that could use more focus and emphasis.

For example, the [Global Fragility Act \(GFA\)](#), which includes Haiti as one of its priority countries, not only lays out a long-term focus for assistance but provides the framework for actively listening to Haitian voices. The diaspora should be one of those groups of voices and it should also help to channel voices from Haiti and insist they receive a proper hearing in policy circles.

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There are also key pieces of Haiti-related legislation, such as the [Haiti Criminal Collusion Transparency Act](#) and the [HOPE/HELP Acts](#), that will help fight corruption and spark economic renewal. The diaspora could help build a broad constituency for these acts and for Haiti in general. The success of such an endeavor would help map out the wishes of the Haitian diaspora while being a decisive step in the advocacy effort vis-a-vis governmental stakeholders and other key decision-makers.

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Nonetheless, it would be an attempt to focus on macro-level issues with the potential to have meaningful policy impact. Such an initiative would require proper

coordination to facilitate substantive engagement with stakeholders. Several ideas come to mind in this regard:

- A facilitation process could take the form of a diaspora committee, an idea already under consideration by the [Ayiti Diaspora Collective](#), a collaborative of U.S.- and Haitian-based organizations. Jamaica's [Global Jamaica Diaspora Council](#) could be a prime source of inspiration as it is a successful effort to mobilize a diaspora to support a national agenda and it regroups and connects the Jamaican diaspora globally to the home population.
- The recent Biden administration initiative to launch the [Presidential Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement](#) provides another model for a Haitian diaspora committee.
- Drawing from these kinds of initiatives, a Haitian diaspora initiative could be composed of representatives across key sectors with access to the U.S. and Haitian governments and key civil society constituencies.

Anchored by the core concept of institutional resilience, these efforts could productively merge with the existing if not yet operationalized [Global Fragility Act](#). With its 10-year timeframe, this would provide a representative, transparent and credible avenue for U.S.-Haiti collaboration, fostering responsible governance and engaged citizenry, which are central components of the GFA. And, on an even bigger scale, the same might apply to even more ambitious proposals such as the [Louverture Investment Plan](#) aimed at rebuilding Haiti.

Haiti Needs More from the Diaspora than Remittances

The United States is not the only place where the Haitian diaspora should take steps to ensure that its voice is heard. The same applies to engagement in Haiti — becoming more civically and economically active actors are pre-conditions for a diaspora that is more relevant in supporting Haiti's path toward stability and progress.

The impact of the diaspora is felt in Haiti primarily through its contribution in remittances, much of which is almost exclusively linked to meeting [personal and family needs](#). While the need to support relatives increases as Haiti's economic and social environment continues to decline, it is not a sustainable way to contribute to the country. Consequently, the Haitian diaspora needs a more targeted mode of engagement. Through direct investment and by enabling greater capital flows into key economic sectors, the diaspora can play an active role in Haiti's economic reconstruction while ensuring a more relevant participation in the country's future.

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There is also an opportunity to have an impact through transferable diaspora expertise. Yet, unless this is channeled through coordinated mechanisms, it runs the danger of being ineffective — or worse, perceived in Haiti as intrusive and uninformed. There are multiple existing channels that should be put to good use, from large diaspora organizations such as the [National Alliance for the Advancement of Haitian Professionals](#) to the Haitian American Foundation for Democracy, as well as business constituencies anchored by chambers of commerce.

The previously mentioned notion of a diaspora committee could be instrumental in synchronizing specific diaspora resources and skills, transparently, with both U.S. governmental initiatives (such as the GFA) and equally important, with Haitian

partners. The latter needs to include linkages to Haiti's transitional Presidential Council and its pressing needs across a spectrum of issues. For starters, this could include security, economic recovery, commitments toward a national conference, and targeted governance needs associated with constitutional and electoral questions.

In ensuring effective utilization of diaspora expert skill sets, one could envision the possibility of a hybrid Haitian civil society-public sector coordination mechanism, matching nationwide and localized community-level needs with diaspora committee expertise and a resource data bank.

More can also be done at the governmental level, despite previous efforts to give the diaspora a more prominent role. Though its contribution is hard to pin down, the Ministry of Haitians Living Abroad, created in 1994 and currently combined with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Affairs, is nonetheless a demonstration of the willingness to integrate the diaspora community. A key provision of the constitutional reform sponsored by former parliamentarian Jerry Tardieu is the promise of a seat in the Haitian parliament. Hence, an important step for the diaspora includes consolidating a more meaningful representation at the governmental level as well as claiming and exercising [voting](#) rights granted by the amended 1987 constitution.

Concurrently, Haiti can also benefit from the expertise of its diaspora to facilitate capacity-building throughout Haiti's public administration. In 2014, the Haitian Embassy in Washington launched a [fellowship](#) program where young Haitian Americans were placed within different ministries in Haiti to learn and enhance the work of those institutions. A similar but more targeted endeavor could include close collaboration between Haiti's administration, embassies and a diaspora committee that strategically select and place expertise into Haitian institutions.

The Diaspora Can Be the X factor for Haiti

The temptation to find quick results at the expense of durable solutions is inescapable — particularly when Haiti is in crisis. Diaspora leaders must prioritize long-term efforts for long-term impacts. Just as other diaspora communities are playing pivotal roles in shaping U.S. diplomacy, Haiti’s diaspora can also play a decisive role in bringing relief and prosperity to Haiti. By coordinating and uniting its members behind a set of policies, making more effective use of their strengths and building on existing achievements, the diaspora can be a game-changer for Haiti. Ultimately, as national and international actors seek to address Haiti’s layers of crises, it is incumbent upon the Haitian diaspora to contribute to ensuring stability, creating opportunities — and perhaps most importantly, committing to never let Haiti atrophy again.

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PHOTO: Prime Minister Garry Conille of Haiti arrives to meet with members of Congress at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, July 2, 2024. (Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times)

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