

HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION
Willingness, Know-How, Resources

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"FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA"

From Charity to Development



Lessons of Innovation and Development, A Haitian in El Salvador

Let's imagine. The year was 1952 on the beach of Aquin, Haiti, where two children, Loulou, a fisherman's son, and Aldy, a lawyer's son, played carefree. Fate led me to study medicine abroad, while Loulou followed in his father's footsteps. His tragic loss at sea at the age of 24 deepened my desire to improve maritime safety in Aquin, Haiti, which motivated me to explore effective models in other countries. This longing led me to El Salvador.

Before leaving, warnings about the maras overshadowed the image of El Salvador. Still, on board the plane from Miami, the Salvadoran diaspora radiated enthusiasm to return to their land and enjoy pupusas, a traditional dish made from corn dough filled with cheese, beans, and pork crackling, reflecting their identity and tradition. Upon arrival, the modern San Salvador airport and the warm welcome from Ernesto and his girlfriend Raquel contrasted with the grim warning.



Culinary delights: exploring pupusas and omelets.

Shipyard Visit: Learning from Local Craftsmanship

We headed straight to La Union to visit an artisanal shipyard, which was crucial for my plans in Haiti. Outside the airport, lush forests surrounded the area, winding through a green and pristine landscape. During the journey and later in conversations with the people of La Union, the profound impact of maras violence on Salvadoran society was revealed, reminding me of similar scars in Haiti due to insecurity and instability.



Ernesto, Aldy, and señor Cruz: bridging craftsmanship and modernity

La Union, located on the coast of the Gulf of Fonseca, was founded in 1522 and rich in history, with an economy based on fishing and tourism; offered the perfect setting to learn about artisanal shipbuilding. Early in the morning, we headed to the beautiful Playas del Tamarindo, where, on a picturesque corner of the coast, Mr. Cruz's shipyard was located. There, tradition and modernity merged under the tropical sun.

The meticulous process of building boats from molds with fiberglass captured my attention until the pungent smells of resin and the noise of the power tools, cutting, fitting, and polishing cut short my observations.



Transport on two canoes.

Politics and Economy: Impact of Bukele's Policies

Back in San Salvador, discussions with Ernesto and meetings with civil society and government officials highlighted El Salvador's efforts to remodel its political and economic structure. These meetings inspired me to share with my fellow Haitians the strategies of El Salvador to combat crime and foster development, even depending significantly on remittances like Haiti.

Despite the deep patriotism and pride and the positive attitude toward the future that characterize Salvadorans, the nation has faced significant challenges in terms of violence and crime. This history of violence established a challenging context that the administration of Nayib Bukele has sought to transform through forceful and controversial measures. Exacerbated after the civil war of 1980 to 1992, violence and crime in El Salvador have been marked by gang extortion, known as "Maras." These gangs extorted the population by imposing a "rent," and refusal to pay often resulted in murders. The situation reached a critical point in 1995, with a homicide rate of 141.72 per 100,000 inhabitants. Despite a slight improvement in 2015, with 105 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, it was under Nayib Bukele's administration, starting in 2022, that a drastic reduction in violence began with the "War Against Gangs." This campaign led to the incarceration of about 70,000 alleged gang members, and the homicide rate dropped to 17.6 in 2022 and even further to 2.4 in 2023. In comparison, in 2022, the homicide rate in the United States was 6.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Unlike El Salvador, Haiti has seen an alarming increase in its homicide rates. In 2021, the rate was 13.01 per 100,000 inhabitants, and by 2023, it is projected to rise to over 40.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, representing an increase of 119.4%. Haiti faces unique

challenges, such as political instability and the power of armed gangs controlling large sectors of Port-au-Prince and other areas, exacerbating violence and insecurity.

Since taking office in 2019, President Nayib Bukele declared a state of emergency in El Salvador in March 2022 following an increase in gang violence. This action suspended certain constitutional rights and facilitated easier arrest procedures. Although effective in temporarily restricting gang activities and reducing violence, these measures have generated controversy and criticism from human rights organizations. Bukele's response is to prioritize the human rights of "honest citizens" over those of criminals. Additionally, he declared a frontal war against corruption. He announced the construction of a new prison for corrupt individuals and "white-collar criminals," just as a mega-prison for gang members was built. He declared that his government would go after every corrupt individual in the country, regardless of how long ago the crime occurred, as corruption crimes no longer have statutes of limitations.

Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, the executive director of Lawyers for Civil Rights, highlights that under Bukele's administration, El Salvador has moved from a multiparty political system to a government structure dominated by the executive. This change, characterized by tactics such as occupying Congress and manipulating social media, challenges fundamental democratic values such as checks and balances, separation of powers, and civil liberties. In June 2023, the Legislative Assembly approved two of Bukele's proposals to reduce the number of municipalities from 262 to 44 and the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly from 84 to 60; the reductions will take effect on May 1, 2024. In contrast, Haiti has experienced chronic political instability, exacerbated by political assassinations, such as the murder of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, and a lack of periodical and effective elections. This instability has impeded the implementation of effective policies and has left the country vulnerable to corruption and control by armed gangs.

Bukele's security strategy has not only altered the landscape of crime but has also brought about significant changes in the political and economic structure of El Salvador. While these political changes seek to stabilize the country, El Salvador's economy continues to rely heavily on remittances, representing 23.7% of its gross domestic product (GDP) of \$34,015.62 million, largely dependent on migration for family welfare and economic stability. On the other hand, Haiti remains one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, with a per capita GDP significantly lower than that of



Urban Blooms: the rapid rise of Salvadoran architecture

El Salvador. Remittances make up 37.60% of Haiti's GDP (\$20.25 million), reflecting the country's dependence on the external economy and the lack of substantial local opportunities.



Awakening of a nation in transformation

The dependence on remittances highlights the need for robust economic and security strategies, such as those implemented against gangs, which have transformed the country's social and criminal dynamics. Research by InSight Crime reveals that although gang activities have been significantly neutralized, about one-third of gang members remain at large, with approximately 53 active cells. Therefore, unresolved social and economic problems continue to fuel the gang culture. Without a definitive strategy to address these underlying causes, there is a possibility of a resurgence of criminal activity.

Innovation and Development: Collaboration with Major Tech Companies

Security improvements have opened new doors for development, including attracting foreign investments and collaborating with tech giants like Google, which now supports the digital transformation of El Salvador. Google opened its office in San Salvador on April 15, 2024, marking the beginning of its operations in El Salvador. This opening aims to support the country's digital transformation, the modernization of its government services, and strengthen its economic development in Central America.



An intellectual hub: small town, big knowledge

Since August 2023, Google has collaborated with the Salvadoran government in optimizing public services and training government entities. The company has actively participated in government digital projects in health and education, including the development of a telemedicine platform and improvements in basic public education in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Initiatives to Attract Foreign Talent

In addition, the Salvadoran government is promoting relocation to the country and has launched a proposal to grant citizenship to 5,000 qualified foreign workers, including scientists, engineers, doctors, artists, and philosophers. The government will facilitate their installation, offering tax exemptions and tariffs on transferring

their families and belongings. In December 2023, El Salvador implemented a visa program that provides residency and a path to citizenship for foreign investors. This initiative represents an attractive opportunity for technicians considering moving to El Salvador.

The support of companies like Google reflects the positive change under Bukele's administration, a widely shared perception among Salvadorans. According to a recent survey by the Central American University (UCA), 9 out of 10 Salvadorans consider President Nayib Bukele's administration has represented a positive change for El Salvador. The most notable achievements in his first two years in office include effectively managing of the COVID-19 pandemic, recognized by 22.6% of the population. Additionally, his economic support to citizens, effective measures against crime, improvements in the health system, especially in the vaccination process, and efforts to combat corruption are positively valued. It is important to consider that perceptions of his administration may vary among different sectors of the population.

Lessons for Haiti

During my visit to El Salvador to explore an artisanal shipyard with the idea of replicating a similar model in Haiti, I observed a revealing comparison between the political and economic realities of both countries. El Salvador and Haiti, two countries facing similar challenges, can take very different paths in terms of policies and development. While El Salvador has made significant advances in security and governance that could serve as a model for Haiti, the latter continues to struggle with instability that hinders its progress. The security and stability of El Salvador, reinforced by an aggressive strategy against gangs that has drastically reduced the homicide rate, contrast with the alarming increase in violence and insecurity in Haiti.

El Salvador, whose economy still heavily depends on remittances just like Haiti, has managed to implement policies that have attracted foreign investment and improved its infrastructure. These initiatives have transformed the country into a benchmark for innovation and logistical development. In contrast, Haiti continues to face political and economic instability that hampers its development.

What are the opportunities and risks of integrating the Haitian diaspora, like myself, into the economic development of the country, similar to how El Salvador has used remittances and foreign investment for its growth? Integrating the Haitian diaspora into the economic development, similar to El Salvador with its remittances and foreign investment, offers promising opportunities for growth through the transfer of knowledge, skills, and capital. However, this strategy carries risks such as excessive remittance dependence, discouraging local economic solutions, and exacerbating social inequalities. A balanced and well-regulated approach could maximize benefits while minimizing risks, ensuring that the diaspora's participation truly catalyzes inclusive and sustainable development for Haiti.

All things considered, the Salvadoran experience offers a ray of hope and a potential model for reform. If El Salvador has been able to face and begin to overcome its challenges through targeted policies and international collaboration, Haiti must also find a path to stability and progress. If not, “w ap kon jòj” (If you don't do it, you'll kick yourself.)



Glimmers of hope: The Salvadoran experience shines light on Haiti

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