

**HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION**  
**Willingness, Know-How, Resources**

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**"FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA"**  
**From Charity to Development**



**Can we decentralize a non-centralized Haiti? A diaspora in Haiti**

“Avan jou” [at dawn], as Diony so aptly says in Creole, Philippe, Diony, and I set out from Aquin towards Brodequin. We took a shortcut, passing through Chanmi, a charming hamlet perched on a hill, offering a breathtaking view of the majestic bay of Aquin, lit by the pink and shimmering glow of dawn announcing the sunrise over the Caribbean Sea.

As we descended the other side of the hill, the winding river awaited us at “première pas” [first crossing]. Our mountainous journey had sharpened our appetites; we stopped to snack by the water, surrounded by tranquility reminiscent of Western movie scenes. However, this calm shattered when Diony, our young local guide, crouched by the river, cleared some leaves and drank directly from the water using his hands as a cup.

Philippe, a true Parisian, and I exchanged incredulous looks, aware that this water was teeming with microbes despite its apparent purity. “Acute gastroenteritis in less than an hour,” Philippe whispered. Diony, sadly unaware of the danger, claimed to have drunk this water all his life. The truth is that contaminated water like this contributes to Haiti's high child mortality rate. The sad statistics from the EMMUS-VI of 2016-2017 bear witness. Out of 1,000 live births, 81 children die before age five, 59 before their first birthday, and 32 in their first month of life. It is often said in Haiti that a germ must be as sturdy as an ox to defeat a Haitian who has survived past the age of five.

After crossing the winding river about ten times, we began a challenging trek through mountains and valleys. I then understood the Haitian proverb: "Behind a mountain, there is another mountain." Exhausted, I saw Philippe walking easily with the stride of someone accustomed to the French Alps. We finally took a break, an opportunity for us city dwellers to embark on one of our sempiternal intellectual debates about everything and nothing.

I began: "Have you noticed, Philippe, that since Haiti's independence in 1804, the Haitian government has never intervened here in Brodequin? This observation also applies to the other 80% of the country that we call the 'country outside.' Haiti needs genuine decentralization." - "No, no, no," emphasized Philippe with his finger, "You can't really talk about decentralization for a country that has never truly been centralized."

Looking at the concepts of centralization and decentralization, two distinct governance approaches emerge.

In a centralized unitary country like Haiti, the Dominican Republic, or France, the Central State concentrates decision-making and administrative power. In theory, there are deconcentrated territorial bodies of the Central State. Its advantages include uniform decision-making powers, strict control, and a quick response in a crisis. Its drawbacks often involve further distancing from local specificities, risking unsuitable decision-making.

In contrast, a decentralized state delegates decision-making powers to local entities based on their institutional characteristics (municipalities, departments, regions). Its benefits consider local needs. Its drawbacks include risks of disparities, overlapping competencies among communities, and coordination complexities. This assumes strong, competent decentralized entities from the Central State to ensure legality and compliance with legal rules for decisions made by local communities.

Concerning centralization and decentralization, Haiti's case, where everything is concentrated in Port-au-Prince, offers a unique perspective beyond definitions, considering the State's implication. Haiti's historical evolution has led to a major concentration of resources, power, and opportunities in the capital of Port-au-Prince, with significant socio-economic implications. The consequences are tangible: overpopulation in the capital, excessive infrastructure pressure, economic disparity between the capital and the rest of the country, and a limited capacity for other regions to develop and meet local needs.

What would be a renewed approach to decentralization in Haiti? Decentralization is primarily a political will expressed in the Nation-State, meaning the community of the people and rulers acknowledges that local communities are one of the drivers of development, described as sustainable in its environmental, social, and economic dimensions. It is also a desire to distribute power, allowing a balanced democracy that considers local peculiarities to enhance population synergies within a state that recognizes and supports them in their developments. The win-win approach ensures the growth and sustainability of the concerned State.

What is the criterion for balanced development of all regions of Haiti? Undoubtedly, it is the acknowledgment that Haiti is not just composed of a central island that its capital represents but also a country of diversity with its provinces and communal sections. Haiti's original settlement is a testament to this. It is about breaking away from the idea that Port-au-Prince is the only entity capable of deciding and energizing the country. The current situation clearly shows that this idea of centrality is far from the right solution. On the contrary, the current disaster illustrates that this idea is entirely obsolete.

The trust of the elites, from the provinces to the communal sections, must be the cornerstone of a country's recovery policy. Cicero, already in Ancient Rome, in his work in 54 BC, "De Republica", shows how much this bond of trust between "the electi and the populus" is an essential condition for proper public affairs management.

On the initial question, can one decentralize a non-centralized Haiti? The direct and unambiguous answer is no. Why? To move forward, Haiti needs to change its model. Haiti needs to return to the basic necessities of a functional state, namely:

1. an efficient educational system producing men and women capable of managing public affairs (political staff and staff of central, decentralized, and deconcentrated public administrations)
2. a fundamentally stable economy that delivers growth, enabling the operation of genuine decentralization
3. a strategic state in its capacity for internal regulation, both for itself and for local authorities, and also in its external relations with its international partners.

Beyond the basic needs of a modern state, the cultural dimension linked to Haiti's creation must be considered a significant condition for the country's lasting recovery. In a fruitful and non-antagonistic

relationship, it is essential to integrate the aspects of "tradition and modernity." Haiti needs to emerge from the Platonic cave in which it is trapped in a kind of blindness, of a distant past that continues to produce a flawed reality. This allegory opposes the underground cave 'without light' and the "world above," where natural light shines. The former is a place of confinement, ignorance, and appearances, while the latter is about freedom, knowledge, and reality. These fundamental points should allow the initiation of a recovery process. The mention of decentralization should not be considered a political aim but a political outcome of organizing a modern state.

At this juncture, the Haitian State must accept to project itself into a new paradigm to have the organizational tools and skills to start its recovery. It is about relying on the first level of subsidiarity of the central state, namely the implementation of the administrative principle whereby a central authority can only carry out tasks that cannot be done at a lower level. By creating national public institutions responsible for operations, leaving central ministries to set political and strategic objectives, and ensure ongoing and final control of public policies, the subsidiarity principle is effective; it refocuses the central state on strategic and operational contents. Initially, the priority is for the Ministries of Education, Health, and Social Affairs before others follow this modernization movement. For example, referencing the Swedish model of state organization, it would be advisable to assign only strategic aspects to the state and delegate the implementation of public policies to public agencies. With its excellent administration, France has not only faced this need. Still, it has also conducted significant modernization reforms to adapt its central administration to contemporary challenges, especially in the digital field. These examples demonstrate the utmost importance of first addressing the reform of the state and priority sectors such as national education, which Benin, for instance, has declared as a priority, making it mandatory, secular, and, most importantly, free.

During our discussions on Haiti's governance, a musical rara parade magically erupted, playing an entrancing Petro rhythm. We suddenly found ourselves in a spontaneous celebration. Music, dance, and colors merged into a celebration of life, reminding us that the Haitian spirit remains untamed despite the challenges. And, with his enthusiastic yet offbeat hip gyrations, Philippe, our Parisian, became, for a moment, the star of this celebration, dancing a "danse banda" like a rare bird amidst the choreographed dancers.

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