

Stay Out of Haiti!!

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Here’s a hard truth some of our colleagues in the NGO world may not like...STAY OUT OF HAITI!

And it’s not because of the reasons that immediately come to mind such as the political unrest, gang violence, kidnapping, natural disasters, travel bans, and the like. Instead, it’s because YOU cannot solve Haiti’s poverty problem! In fact, YOU may be the problem! Whether your organization has come to Haiti to alleviate poverty, care for the “orphans” or to rush in and save them from the next disaster, your work as an NGO or volunteer does not automatically, or even likely, result in an effective, long-term solution for the people and communities in Haiti to become independent and self-sufficient. And these two outcomes should be the goal of any organization working in Haiti and other developing countries.

On my first trip to Haiti as a financial controller, it was evident that more than enough money was flowing in to support the orphanage I was there to assess. But unfortunately, very little funding was directly benefiting the children for whom it was intended. Imagine pouring thick honey into the opening of a slender bottle – more honey will be on the outside rather than on the inside of the bottle. That kind of waste was happening at this orphanage. The money was not being used to equip the children for the future, or to assist them in being successfully reunited with their families. I saw firsthand the damage done by those with good intentions...and others who were, for their own personal gain, intentionally taking advantage of the poverty/dependence mindset of Haitians and the corrupt environment in

which they lived. This was the beginning of my journey to transform a corrupt organization, to face the irreparable damage to children caused by the unnecessary separation from their family and community, and to form relationships with Haitians who were motivated to develop better solutions that lead to their independence and self-sufficiency. Through our efforts we were able to identify many useful strategies that overcome the corruption and can successfully focus the resources and mission to equip and empower Haitians to chart their own course to autonomy.

Ineffective Foreign Interventions

Haiti has cultivated a culture of corruption and chaos for decades resulting in fraud, waste and mismanagement of resources both locally and internationally. In 2010, the earthquake that caused great devastation across the country got the attention of the world, and the response from NGOs was massive. In a constant state of chaos, organizations are able to fly under the radar, creating ineffective projects and programs that actually result in more dependence and poverty. More than a decade later, in response to the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August 2021, organizations are still investing millions of dollars in unsustainable recovery efforts such as providing weak housing made of plywood and built by outsiders and importing goods that should be produced in the country by locals. The results of these ineffective, even harmful, activities in the name of missions for good is the destruction of any economy that may exist, structures that will rot within months, and a deepened culture of dependency.

Approaches to alleviate poverty are often created with American/Western mindsets, resulting in temporary, unsustainable quick “fixes” to major, systemic problems. For example, one of the responses after the 2010 disaster was the proliferation of orphanages that unnecessarily and catastrophically separated more than 30,000 children from their families and communities. Millions of dollars poured into the country under the premise of providing basic needs for children, believing that this would change the future of Haiti. Well, it did dramatically change the future of Haiti – **for the worse.**

Orphanages enable organizations to use highly effective methods for raising money: using the devastating housing conditions to support the orphanages infrastructure, playing on the emotions of donors to sponsor children, and creating long-term support by hosting mission trips that form damaging relationships between donors and children. The corrupt conditions in Haiti make it easy for organizations to circumvent Haitian regulations resulting in programs that are poorly implemented and make life worse for Haitian families and communities. These are just some of the approaches that perpetuate generational poverty and dependence – both economically and psychologically.

Perpetuating Generational Poverty and Dependence

In Haiti, like many developing regions, there are broad gaps in the availability of services to meet the basic needs of families and communities. This is the primary reason generational dependency and poverty continue to be the norm. Hundreds of NGOs and private institutions are attempting to fill these gaps for education, healthcare, and more. No doubt this comes with some benefit, but unfortunately, many of the approaches taken by organizations in their efforts to maintain and grow donor relationships unintentionally deprive Haitian families of their dignity and right to experience self-sufficiency. Their approaches fail to create and foster sustainable development and hinder Haitians from taking ownership of their own futures and autonomy. And when these efforts are implemented, supported, and managed by foreign staff and volunteers, they ultimately take valuable jobs and skills training away from Haitians, keeping them trapped in a state of dependency.

If we truly envision a stronger Haiti where individuals, families and communities are able to experience independence and self-sufficiency, **then the ultimate long-term picture does not include foreign NGOs.** This includes Overture International. But we have a long road ahead of us and it DOES require a long-term commitment to Haiti built on relationships and equipping Haitians with the skills and resources so that THEY can create positive change within THEIR own country. Our approach to alleviating extreme poverty in Haiti must start by investing in human development – focusing on the well-being of individuals and respecting the rights of Haitians

to determine and manage their own development path. Our role is not to be a savior, but a steward, trusting in their own desire, motivation, ability and skills to gain independence and autonomy. Like every human, they deserve the right to succeed or fail under their own power and determination.

A better way forward

People are our most important assets. And in Haiti, we've seen children, families and communities become the change they want to see in their country! They're motivated, capable and hungry for autonomy and independence. There is hope for Haiti, and that hope lies in the skills and determination of **Haitians**, not in us or our efforts. There is a role for us to play in the future of Haiti, but our approach should be committed to developing healthy, deferential relationships with Haitians, so they become the primary leaders in the development, implementation, and delivery of their efforts to build stronger communities. ***So, what does that look like?***

Sustainable development in Haiti must **make human development the priority**. This means investing in training to develop viable skills and build a social support system that transforms the poverty/dependence mindset and empowers individuals and communities. Effective training must ultimately be led by Haitians themselves, as they hold the position, agency and influence to move their families, friends and neighbors to action. **Haitians need our collaboration and resources to support their efforts**. Our knowledge and experiences are valuable tools to pass along through training to our leaders in Haiti. But we must allow them to use the information as they see it best conforms to their goals, culture and society. At Overture, we've seen this model work in communities across southern Haiti. The community members appreciate and gravitate towards gaining education and skills they can use to earn a living for their families, provide needed services to their communities and help build an infrastructure and economy that is sustainable.

So, ultimately, if you aren't part of the solution that equips and empowers Haitians for independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency, please, for our sake, your sake and their sake, **STAY OUT OF HAITI!** But, if you're willing to invest your time, talent and treasure in building up these amazing people of

Haiti for a sustainable and prosperous future, we welcome you to join Overture International and many other great organizations in this battle for independence and self-sufficiency!

About the Author

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