

HAITI IN THE BALANCE: WHY FOREIGN AID HAS FAILED AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

TERRY F. BUSS WITH ADAM GARDNER

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Review by Andrew S. Thompson*

The poorest and arguably most volatile country in the Americas, Haiti, can routinely be found toward the bottom of the list on virtually all indexes that attempt to quantify and rank state fragility. By most measures—be they political, social, economic, and environmental—Haiti scores amongst the worst in the world. The difference between Haiti and most other fragile states, however, is that the tiny Caribbean country that occupies the western half of the Island of Hispaniola has been the object of considerable international attention, both through decades of massive amounts of foreign aid and, more recently, two UN-led military interventions in the last two decades, neither of which has resulted in more than a tenuous stability for Haitians. Rightly or wrongly, the common perception is that Haiti is the “basket case of the new world,” a country with so many strikes against it that it is difficult to imagine a better future for its citizens.

Terry Buss, a professor at the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University in Australia, and Adam Gardner, a graduate student of public administration at the University of Southern California, have attempted to explain why international assistance has failed to produce any lasting results in Haiti in a new book entitled *Haiti in the Balance: Why Foreign Aid Has Failed and What We Can Do About It*, co-published by Brookings Institution Press and the National Academy of Public Administration. Intended principally for US policy makers responsible for administering aid programs in Haiti specifically, and fragile states more generally, the book provides a good overview and critique of both the long and difficult political transition from Duvalierism to democratic rule, which has been ongoing since the popular revolution of 1986 that brought an end to the Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier regime, and the aid policies of outside actors, most notably Washington, that helped shape that transition. Perhaps overstating the influence and reformative power of the international community, their thesis is that aid has failed to have a meaningful or lasting effect in large part because “donors collectively failed to deal with political instability and poor governance as the most important drivers of failure, from which all other negative consequences would follow.” As such, Haiti offers a useful case study in “some of the worst practices in aid assistance” (p. 6).

The first two-thirds of the book serve as a useful primer on Haiti’s governance challenges and the international community’s involvement in Haiti’s internal affairs. They rightly observe that “Haiti has always been a shuttlecock in a larger global diplomatic game. Haiti’s destiny has never been really quite its own” (p. 47). Buss and Gardner begin with a brief survey of the Haitian political and economic landscape from the colonial period to the insurrection of February 2004, stressing the predatory and authoritarian tendencies of those in power, both of

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which have contributed greatly to systemic violence and underdevelopment. This is followed by short, critical summaries of both the negative effects of two decades worth of uneven and highly politicized bilateral (most notably US foreign aid) and multilateral aid policies to Haiti from 1990 to the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper of 2003 and the Updated Interim Cooperation Framework (ICF) of July 2006, which together serve as the blue print for stimulating economic growth and development in Haiti in the short and medium terms, and of US foreign policy towards Haiti from George Bush, Sr. to George Bush, Jr. Appropriately, they close this portion of the book by tracing the collective missteps in the practices and policies of administering foreign aid on the part of both the Haitian government and the donor community (governmental and non-governmental), concluding, as have many others, that assistance to Haiti has to date been an utter failure, and that “[a]id suspensions not only reversed any positive benefits programs might have had but also have precipitated a host of negative unintended consequences” (p. 85).

The last third of the book consists of two chapters on “lessons learned,” which consists of dozens of policy recommendations on how to reform and improve both the delivery of aid to Haiti and the administration of governance and democracy programs, and a third that offers a brief review of the policies and programs of the Préval government. There is considerable virtue in devoting so much of the book to policy prescriptions, and Buss and Gardner do provide a thorough survey of the numerous aid failures of the past—such as the absence of aid harmonization or alignment amongst donors (pp. 138, 142), the lack of Haitian ownership of aid programs (p. 142), the need for greater emphasis on capacity building, institutional reform, and assessment mechanisms (pp. 145-152), and the tendency on the part of international actors to rush into premature elections (p. 156).

This, however, is also where the book begins to lose its persuasiveness. While they do highlight what has gone wrong in the past, their recommendations do not consistently offer solutions on how to overcome these same problems in the present and future. Many of the recommendations, such as the international community must “take donor-to-government and donor-to-donor coordination seriously” (p. 152), are too simplistic, and neither take into account of nor offer solutions to overcoming the deep-seated political reasons why the international aid system operates the way it does in Haiti and elsewhere.

Other recommendations are seemingly contradictory, and potentially even counter-productive. The authors contend that donors should disengage with civil society organizations (CSOs) on the grounds that many are elitist, fractious, deeply politicized, and willing to use violence to undermine the state (p. 154), but then call on donors to “expand opportunities for poor people to participate in the political system” by “creating an ‘enabling environment’ [what exactly this means or how it would be fostered is not explained] in which the poor are given incentives for collective action and mobilization,” so long as it does not occur through CSOs (p. 158). The authors also note that the entire criminal justice system is in need of being reformed in order to create a climate of rule of law, but then advocate operating outside that same system for dealing with the human rights abuses of the past and confronting the culture of impunity that plagues Haiti (pp. 159-160). Moreover, they caution against privatization programs unless there is a domestic appetite for such programs (p. 162),

but then suggest that economic growth and development in Haiti “depends on structural adjustment” (p. 164) as outlined in the now infamous Washington Consensus.

The year 2008 will be remembered as a terribly difficult year for Haitians, one that was marked by tremendous political volatility and setbacks to economic growth, prompted first by the food inflation riots and then by severe tropical storms of the spring and summer, respectively. Despite these events, the authors remain refreshingly, albeit cautiously, optimistic about Haiti’s future, citing some early improvements in both the security, political, and economic situations during the first two years of the current Préval government, and in the ways in which international aid is being administered. The authors conclude the book on a highly debatable point, however. They suggest that Haiti is, at the moment, at a “critical juncture” and that if “Préval does not turn Haiti around, then it is likely that the international community will take over and move from assistance to occupation” (p. 182). This is simply untrue. While at the time of the anti-Aristide insurrection there was some talk amongst some officials that Haiti should become a UN-trusteeship, the appetite for taking over the governance of a sovereign country is simply not there, not amongst international actors and definitely not amongst Haitians, who would never accept such an arrangement. Rather, the aim is to create an environment in which international actors can exit the country with confidence that they would not have to return again a few years later.

The book’s incongruities aside, *Haiti in the Balance* provides a useful introduction to Haiti’s recent struggles, and how international actors have responded to and, in some cases, exacerbated the country’s problems. Moreover, its central argument is crucially important—that if Haiti’s future is to be brighter than its past and present, then governance on the part of all stakeholders will need to be improved. For if it is not, if substantive signs of progress are not visible soon, then donors may be tempted to withdraw before genuine reform can take hold, and sentiments that Haiti is destined to forever be a “basket case” will in turn become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
