

ImajiNASYON: Character Building through Regenerative Community Action and Narrative Change in Haiti

Description of need

“Imagining, and making a better world”

“Fokal is a movement of cultural reclamation, political restoration and spiritual liberation”

Reverend **Kelvin Sauls**, co-founder and current Board Chair of Black Alliance for Just Immigration BAJI
(visit to FOKAL in 2018)

In Haiti, there exists a majority that has been historically and structurally marginalized

Approximately 70% of the rural and urban population of Haiti are living under poverty level with little access to basic services.

This denial of access to basic rights and services reflects a profound structural injustice that is rooted in history.

Education in Haiti, while providing technical skills, also instills defeatist narratives and disconnects from the deep rural heart of Haitian history and culture resulting in disaffection and brain drain. 65% of Haiti's 11 million are between the ages of 15 and 35, with most from disadvantaged families. This is a demographic bonus in any country in need of development. Yet, because the Haitian education system alienates and disempowers its youth, this resource does not reach its potential. Meanwhile, Haiti's most productive sector is its historically marginalized farmers who, in spite of adversity and poverty, continue to demonstrate that farming, in tune with nature, breeds dignity, courage and resilience. Farmers sacrifice to send their children to school but are unable to positively counteract the disconnect brought by the school system. Lack of appreciation for Haiti's heritage and blindness to the economic potential of smallholder farming bring disaffection (leading to idleness or joining violent gangs) and brain drain (unchecked, unsafe migration). Most youth are of provincial origin and many struggle against a negative narrative knowing that they could still be part of building a different Haiti. They need mentorship and opportunities to revisit history and a constructive reading of the present. ImajiNASYON will help them value their own identity, reconnect with their parents' cultural universe, and apply their skills to becoming the bonus their country needs.

History of a nation

Haiti is a Caribbean nation state founded in 1804 by former slaves of African origin and free people of color of Afro-European descent, through a complex and brutal struggle launched by a slave revolt in 1791 in the French colony of Saint Domingue. While the French Revolution abolished slavery in their colonies in 1794, Napoleon reestablished it in 1802. In Saint Domingue the French sent an expeditionary army to do so, which triggered the final and victorious combat of the former slaves struggle for freedom and independence against the most famous military power of the times.

Haiti is a Taino name, chosen by our founding father Jean-Jacques Dessalines (born a slave in Saint Domingue, he became an officer of the revolutionary army) in a symbolic salute to the native occupants of the land utterly decimated by genocide, famine and disease brought on from the moment of Christopher Columbus' arrival in 1492.

Today's historically marginalized majority is comprised of the descendants of the captives forced into slavery who:

- **Fought for emancipation since 1791 against the most brutal slave regime** of the region under French rule in the colony of Saint Domingue.
- **Became sharecropping or smallholder farmers** after the only successful war against slavery/colonialism waged and won by the victims themselves thereby achieving for all humankind a moment of epiphany that remains imbedded in the invention of the nation of Haiti. It is the work of those farmers that enabled Haiti to pay the iniquitous indemnity demanded by France forcing Haiti to contract scandalous debts to private French banks; a debt later bought back by the US who in turn demanded Haiti's payments until the middle of the twentieth century.
- **Paid the highest price of the overall relegation of Haiti.** Overall, Haiti was assigned the role to serve as a foil to signify to all would be freedom fighters in the US and elsewhere of the tragic fate of a successful self-made emancipation. Haitian's monumental victory was set as a monumental failure. After independence was achieved in 1804 at a terrible price (the grueling wars of 1791-1803), a ruling class emerged, affirmed Haiti's emancipatory mission to the world and was confronted with racist world boycott and embargo – and was itself relegated. The ruling class was unable/incapable to turn to its own people to build the Haitian State. Consequently, today we inherit a congenitally weak State and a structurally marginalized majority (see Haiti: State Against Nation. The origins and legacy of Duvalierism, by Michel-Rolf Trouillot), deadlocked and forced to seek solutions outside Haiti.
- **Seeks survival through migration inside and outside the national territory.**

Inside: Smallholder and sharecropping farmers survived with courage, invented a spirituality and a way of life, cultivated the land and constitute to this day both the poorest and most productive section of the population. Dwindling resources and demographic pressure drives migration towards cities where they are relegated to shanty towns and violently mistreated by the State. Attempts by Haitian farmers and underprivileged urban dwellers to express their humanity and demand equitable access to basic rights and services are historically and currently thwarted violently by the State.

Outside: Since the early 1900's and to this day the US imposed vision to this part of the world relegated that population to a role of cheap labor, transporting mostly male Haitian workers to US owned sugar plantations in Cuba and in the Dominican Republic, thus creating in the neighboring republic to Haiti the profound inequities still experienced by their Dominican descendants while setting the false narrative of "ancestral hatred" between the two countries.

Marginalization pursues the marginalized Haitian people into migration to the region (current incidents in Guyana, Bahamas, DR) and to the US (although they also manage to thrive there).

As a Haitian open society foundation, FOKAL has posed the issue of the historical marginalization of the Haitian people as the cornerstone of its mission

FOKAL was created in 1995. In the analysis produced to build our very first conceptual framework, we stated that the challenge offered by our funder (OSF) to work toward a Haitian open society, could not be addressed without taking into account the historically marginalized Haitian population. For the past 25 years, we have anchored our actions in explicit and implied inclusion of the marginalized rural and urban human beings that continue to bear witness to Haiti's unique historical role in universal struggle for racial equity.

We have posed as one of our working principles that, in time and space, the marginalized population continues to affirm its humanity through extraordinary spiritual and creative resourcefulness. This must always be somehow made visible in our work.

Clearly, the open society challenge was to engage all segments of our complex society into reflexive actions without ideological blueprints, i.e. without recourse to a preconceived absolute truth but with the active practice of human rights values rooted in a search for their Haitian iteration. We, the facilitators, were to demand first of ourselves the open mindedness and the behavioral transformative process that we wished to be part of in our country.

FOKAL is good at convening a diversity of actors and partner institutions in innovative, dynamic projects to benefit Haitian communities.

Today, we are alarmed by the worsening of all the indicators that, 25 years ago, endangered the emergence of a Haitian open society. We continue to nurture the vibrant sectors of our society but we feel that there is an urgent call to engage more actively significant actors outside our borders.

Opportunities and challenges

In the Dominican Republic, while the 2013 "sentencia" outrageously denationalized hundreds of thousands Dominicans of (mostly) Haitian origin, Dominican civil society saw in the past 2 years the emergence of a vibrant movement of young –often women-led– activism demanding justice and inclusion on fundamental issues (corruption, health services) and bringing forward in its fold an awakening to Dominican African roots with its logical common history with Haiti.

Today in the US, sectors of the Haitian-American community, particularly the young "third generation", descendants of the marginalized majority and of an engaged and educated middle class that fled dictatorial regimes, are reaching out to FOKAL for affirmation of the positive aspects of their Haitian identity. They are also expressing interest in a new kind of collaboration beyond the private practice of sending remittances to their families.

With the Templeton grant proposal, 25 years after its creation, how can a relatively small, albeit well positioned, private foundation, significantly address the problem stated here in a way that can have game-changing repercussion for Haiti and beyond?

When what is needed is deep systemic change, we feel the type of actions that FOKAL can contribute are in the realm of producing strong elements of narrative change and of making sure the production process of narrative change is itself participatory and emancipatory.

The center of gravity of the action must remain in Haiti, out of respect for the root of the victimization process that we are trying to address

At the same time, the action must impulse an outreach to like-minded change-makers in the DR and in the US based diaspora

The marginalized majority has time and time again expressed in many ways its desire to be fully integrated in the modern world while retaining its identity. Consequently, our action must both integrate the people we wish to serve and bring into the action the best of what modernity can offer them in terms of intellectual, scientific, artistic and well-crafted financial resources.

FOKAL's groundbreaking community action initiative, ImajiNASYON, will build resilience and character in a new generation by transforming Haiti's cultural narrative and affirming the positive aspects of Haitian identity, enabling young people to apply their skills and creativity to rediscovered root values and positive intergenerational relations.