

“Haiti’s New Parliament: Is it Doing Its Job? Is It Listening to Citizens?”

SUMMARY

Observatoire Citoyen de l’Action des Pouvoirs Public en Haiti (OCAPH), a widely-respected civil society organization (CSO) based in Port-au Prince, Haiti, proposes to carry out a combination watchdog and civic engagement project designed to strengthen Haiti’s fragile post-election democracy in 2016 and beyond.

We’ll be building on our past successes as a relentless and reliable citizen watchdog, a role we first took on after the devastating 2010 earthquake and have continued to carry out since then. The centerpiece of this project will be to shine a clear light on Haiti’s new Parliament, closely monitoring its actions and communicating what we see and hear. In addition, we’ll alert other civil society groups about developments such as bills of special interest to them, and train them in citizen advocacy techniques. We’ll also organize town hall meetings to create dialogue between citizens and members of Parliament about local issues. And, finally, we will create a dedicated section on our website where we post the latest Parliamentary actions and invite the public to post their reactions.

As has always been the case, OCAPH will not adopt a partisan position on any issue. Our only goal will be to increase Parliament’s transparency and accountability, and empower the people of Haiti to make their voices heard and become part of the legislative process. The project will begin on February 1, 2016 and end on January 31, 2017.

A project such as ours is sorely needed at this point in time. Haiti’s recent political history, especially its Parliamentary history, does not inspire confidence. Millions of dollars have been spent on projects to strengthen Parliament with little to show for it. Public confidence has plummeted. Parliamentary elections originally scheduled for 2012 were postponed and then postponed again. As time continued to pass with no elections in sight, public frustration grew and demonstrations ensued, sometimes erupting into violence. The impasse came to a head in January of 2015, when the term of every member of Parliament expired. The institution was dissolved, and the President stepped in to govern by decree. When elections finally took place on August 9, 2015, voter turn-out was extremely low, with public distrust still high.

By early 2016, when our project begins, Haiti will have a new President and a new Parliament still in its early stages of existence. At this juncture, the government, including Parliament, will find itself at a crossroads. It will have the potential either to create a new era of increased openness and public responsiveness, or continue down a path of what some have described as endemic secrecy, fraud, and mismanagement. OCAPH is determined to help create that new era of increased civic engagement.

As an indigenous NGO with a deep understanding of Haitian culture, we will turn to citizens for their input both at the beginning and throughout our project. We’ll begin by conducting a citizen cellphone poll about which issues we should focus on as we monitor the new Parliament. Once results are in, we will begin to monitor these issues, attending hearings and initiating dialogue with individual members and committees. To maximize our outreach, we will discuss our findings on radio talk shows under the theme of good governance, and make them available to other local and national media. Our

dual leads for this component of our project will be a highly-respected Haitian professor and historian with extensive experience of government affairs, together with a young leader of an indigenous women's group.

One of the most innovative features of our project will be to create a new section on our website (www.ocaph.org), in both French and Creole, called "Citizens' Eyes on Parliament." There, we'll post OCAPH quarterly reports on Parliament's performance with details such as the number of sessions that took place, which bills passed, the number of special sessions organized, how often members visited their constituencies, expenditures, and how well Parliament is itself monitoring the other two branches of government. We especially will track the status of bills related to the issues citizens identified in our cellphone survey. We'll post photos of individual members of Parliament, identify their constituency, and track their voting record. Perhaps of greatest importance, we'll include a special feature that invites individual citizens to comment and weigh in with their own recommendations for improving Parliament's performance. To our knowledge, providing Haitian citizens in Haiti and the Diaspora with an internationally-available digital voice to critique their Parliament will be "a first."

During the project, OCAPH will maintain interaction with human rights groups, association of economists, young entrepreneurs groups, health associations, and other relevant groups. We will conduct a combination of briefings on Parliamentary actions and training on citizen advocacy. A special focus will be the inclusion of historically marginalized groups such as those representing the disabled, youth at risk, and women. For budget training, we'll be using one of our own resources, "OCAPH Citizen's Guide to the Budget." We'll also be drawing on material from the broad civic education campaign that we already will have conducted nationwide prior to elections in 2015.

In terms of political organizing techniques, we'll include discussions on strategies such as how to create a citizens' petition and use it to put pressure on government officials; when and how to organize a peaceful demonstration; and how to build a citizen alert that gains momentum. We'll also help these groups to themselves establish a network of citizens making their voices heard through direct dialogue with members of Parliament. Note that while our project's particular focus is on the Parliamentary branch of government, the tools we'll be teaching can be used for interaction with all three branches.

Our theory of change, which we'll measure and evaluate, has two components. First, we contend that if OCAPH, as an already widely respected citizen watchdog, makes the new Parliament's actions more broadly known and maintains constructive dialogue with its members, the members themselves will be more likely to maintain consistent communication with the public and improve their performance. And second, if civil society groups and individual citizens gain the knowledge, confidence, and know-how to become engaged, they will themselves become empowered to move Parliament in a direction that better serves their needs. We assert that over time, as government-citizen dialogue becomes stronger and Parliament's actions align with citizen priorities, confidence and public trust will grow, thus strengthening Haiti's democracy.

For additional information, please contact Karl Jean-Louis, OCAPH Senior Advisor Governance Specialist, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, at 509-47-78-44-44, karl@ocaph.org; or Elaine Koerner, OCAPH Outreach Director, Washington, D.C., at elainek@ocaph.org.

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