

The murder of our President last week is a shocking development in a country that has become almost numb to shocking developments. How did we get here? How have we, the first nation in the world to abolish slavery, gotten used to cohabiting with chaos, up to and including the assassination of the President? We seek to answer that question and propose ideas to build the Haiti most of us want to live in.

Both of us are among the rare “success stories” of Haiti’s struggling democratic transition. Daphnée was born in 1986, weeks after the fall of the brutal 34-year Duvalier family dictatorship. Stephanie was born in 1995 and grew up in one of the most lawless districts of the capital. We are lifelong witnesses to, and victims of, the degradation of Haiti’s politics, economics, and security. Often we studied by kerosene lamp because the state rarely provides electricity and sometimes we studied under our beds as gun battles from gang warfare raged outside. Daphnée’s parents didn’t finish primary school and Stephanie’s didn’t finish secondary, but our parents’ focus on education and our love of learning saved us; we won scholarship after scholarship, necessary for success in a country where public secondary schools educate no more than 20 percent of age-eligible children. Now with college degrees, we are part of Haiti’s “one percent”, the educated, economic elite.

How should Haiti work toward providing all its children a shot at similar success? First, Haiti must focus on *process* over products. Second it must prioritize quality public education at all levels, with an emphasis on civic education and patriotism. Many countries may feel that Haiti’s problems are far removed, but the coronavirus has shown us that distant problems that we ignore can soon show up on our door, with devastating effects. So we ask that Haiti’s longstanding partners remain engaged to overcome the weaknesses of past efforts, and we invite new partners to join us in our renewed efforts.

Since the adoption of Haiti’s constitution in 1987, Haitians and our international partners have valued the products of democracy at the expense of its processes. Elections are a prime example. Our constitution establishes a permanent council (CEP in French) to organize elections. The process of electing the CEP is complicated, so for the 1988 elections our leaders made do by appointing a temporary council. No one paid much attention; the election took place. But that single failure was the harbinger of a dangerous trend. Since then, Haitians have held, and international partners have financed, seven Presidential elections as well as additional parliamentary and local elections without ever constituting a permanent CEP. Thirty-three years later Haiti remains without a CEP or any credible electoral institution. Haiti and its partners have so ignored processes in favor of quick results that today there is no constitutional method of choosing an interim President to replace the murdered Moïse. Together we must commit to the long-term investment required to building these institutions which are the foundation of a durable democracy.

An educated population is another pre-requisite for shared participation and prosperity. Although universal education is enshrined in the constitution, and we have made great gains at the primary level, Haiti enrolls only 20 percent of children at the secondary level, the lowest in our hemisphere and less than a quarter of [the regional average](#). Imagine trying to run a modern company with no more than 20 percent of the employees having reached secondary school. We Haitians are trying to run a country like that. Haiti and its friends must commit to massive, long

term investment in universal education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels if we are to have any chance of broadly shared prosperity. Post-secondary education, long dismissed by international donors, is particularly important. Without our university scholarships, our current success and influence would have been unimaginable. Luckily, international donors have begun to see the light on this issue; for the first time ever, the UN sustainable development goals include targets for university scholarships in developing countries. This will be money well spent.

Good education is necessary but not sufficient. As we have reached adulthood we have seen too many of Haiti's educated leaders prioritize their narrow interest over the national interest, and either look the other way when faced with corruption, or participate directly, as the reports on the recent [PetroCaribe scandal](#) demonstrate. We have been lucky to receive strong civic education throughout our academic career, including university scholarships with a focus on active citizenship, community service and ethical leadership. Lessons we learned from our primary school civics textbook, *I Love Haiti*, and from planting trees every May Day, still guide us. Civic education transformed our view of our role in society and what we can accomplish for our country, so much so that one of our service projects at university has blossomed into [ACTIVEH](#), Haiti's largest university student association. If all Haitian children had access to this same information and encouragement in their youth, we could really build a new Haiti.

Of course, counting on people's good feelings and good will are not enough. Corruption exists where there is opportunity. And today our institutions are so weak that the opportunity exists everywhere. Which brings us back to institution building. We have been nurtured by schools and programs that are among Haiti's few remaining strong institutions. We have seen how the emphasis on policies and procedures maintain these institutions and are the foundation of their successful products, among which we can count ourselves.

Rather than use our education to move abroad, we chose to stay and build a better Haiti. Today Haiti is weak and needs international collaboration: thoughtful, targeted and most of all sustained collaboration to strengthen critical institutions, provide good education to all Haitians and encourage them to use their skills to fulfill the long-lost promise of Haiti's inspiring revolution. Won't you join us?

*Daphnée Charles is the Development Officer at the [HELP](#) scholarship program. In 2017 the Lorquet Foundation named her one of Haiti's most influential women. Stephanie Rubin is a Fulbright Scholar at the Rochester Institute of Technology, pursuing an MBA in information management. Both women are graduates of HELP.*