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## Haiti Advocacy Working Group Recent Events: Dialogues between Haitian Institutions and US Aid Groups

*By Scott Freeman, Research Assistant*

This past week, the Haiti Advocacy Working Group put together a gathering of representatives from Haitian NGOs, development aid workers, and a few members of Haitian and American governments. While I wasn't able to attend the entire three day event, I was able to attend the panel on agriculture in Haiti.

The first presentation (by Kelly Geoghean of Environmental Justice Initiative of Haiti) presented the concept of a scorecard for aid institutions, which Mark Cohen (OXFAM) applied to the heavily criticized USAID Winner program. Mr. Cohen raised issues presented by USAID's interventions, how the organization had done little for agrarian reform, and examined the Winner program for both positive aspects and negative aspects of its implementation. While these first two presentations certainly did not provide glowing compliments of agricultural development in Haiti, they attempted to find successful themes within the existing aid paradigms.

These constructive spins on aid implementation were quickly opposed by Doudou Festil (RENHASSA/ *Je nan Je*), and Ricot Jean Pierre (*Plateforme Haitienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif*). Mr. Festil returned to the topic of the Winner program, noting that the millions spent supposedly on aid were for actually for bolstering Coca-Cola, and that in fact the Winner project is a threat to Haiti's food sovereignty. He observed that while many times aid projects say that they will bring positive results, Haitian peasants do not understand it as such. His statements referenced the muted voices of farmers in the discourse of aid implementation. Ricot Jean Pierre followed and continued the criticism of USAID, making the accusation that in fact USAID is guilty of crimes against humanity. These incendiary comments raised eyebrows, and highlighted the ways that the policies of USAID (and aid interventions more broadly) concentrate more on the benefit of aid contractors and American economies than on the radical improvements needed in the Haitian countryside. [For more on critiques of the donor driven policies of agricultural aid in Haiti, see [Shamsie, 2012](#)]

Following these fundamental criticisms was Marie Yvette Michaud (MPP/ *Je nan Je*) and finally Gene Philhouer from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Mr. Philhouer seemed shocked as he began his presentation, wondering if he had been doing the right thing as he directed USDA's assistance programs to Haiti. His bridging comment was that despite disagreements we need to find common ground to work from. The presentation of the USDA's work in Haiti was presented largely as a summary of the projects completed and in progress.

Unfortunately, the dialogue that I had hoped for did not occur. Time was up, and there was no room for questions. Two sides seemed to form, one trying to build on the positive aspects of aid, and the other, objecting fundamentally to the direction of aid in Haiti. Notably, the latter perspective was that of the Haitian invitees, and the former, that of American aid workers. Though the panel offered an opportunity for voices to be raised that otherwise do not make it to the US Capital, challenges to the perspectives of foreign aid and US government interventions seemed to hang in the air unresolved.