

Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic: a different framework

By Wenche Hauge

■ Executive summary

In recent decades Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic has been unregulated. It has garnered more attention after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti caused a slight peak in cross-border migration. The ruling of the Dominican Republic's Constitutional Tribunal on September 23rd 2013, which effectively denationalised many Dominicans of Haitian ancestry, has increased this attention. However, a narrow focus has defined the debate in terms of human rights concerns versus the Dominican Republic's sovereignty. This policy brief shows why it is necessary to broaden the focus to include other aspects of the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, such as asymmetrical trade relations and how they affect Haitian communities along the border between the two countries in particular. It also points out the importance of social representation, and how images that Dominican and Haitian populations have of each other are formed, and influence the situation of Haitian migrant workers and their families in the Dominican Republic. Finally, it argues that more attention should be paid to the role of local civil society in support of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic, because civil society has proven to be very active, using a multifaceted strategy in its work.

Background

In recent decades Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic has been unregulated. It has garnered more attention after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti caused a slight peak in cross-border migration. The September 23rd 2013 ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal (CT) in the Dominican Republic has increased this attention. According to this ruling, Juliana Deguis Pierre, who was born in the Dominican Republic in 1984, had been wrongly registered as a Dominican at her birth. According to the CT, her parents could not prove that their migration status in the Dominican Republic was "regular" and therefore had to be considered as "foreigners in transit" by Dominican legislation (Gamboa & Reddy, 2014: 53). The consequences for Pierre was that she would not be entitled to the citizenship granted to her at birth and that she would be denationalised. In addition the CT also ordered the Dominican Civil Registry Agency to review all birth registries after 1929 and remove all persons from these registries who were supposedly wrongly registered and recognised as Dominican citizens. These events formed the background to a conference of researchers, non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) and politicians held in Norway in 2014. Since then a major development has been a new CT ruling in November 2014 purporting to delink the Dominican Republic from the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Conference: Hispaniola 2014: Justice, Nationality and Migration

On September 18th-19th 2014 the two-day conference on Hispaniola 2014: Justice, Nationality and Migration was held in Oslo, with speakers from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Norway, Sweden and the U.S. The conference was organised by the University of Oslo, the Norwegian University of Technology and Science, the Peace Research Institute Oslo and Norwegian Church Aid. Its main focus was on the CT ruling in the Dominican Republic and the consequences for Dominicans of Haitian ancestry and Haitian migrants. However, conference presentations also looked at topics such as the political economy of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, local models of conflict prevention in Haiti, the situation along the Haitian/Dominican border and the role of international

NGOs in the fight for justice in Hispaniola. Below some of these topics will be dealt with, new ideas advanced and gaps identified in terms of future research needed.

Much research has been conducted on Haitian-Dominican migration, both pre- and post-earthquake, e.g. Wooding and Moseley-Williams (2004), MUDHA and GARR (2005) and Kristensen and Wooding (2013). There is also significant literature on the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, such as Antonini (2012) and Martínez (2013). However, there is a need for complementary research on these topics from new and innovative angles.

Border relations

During the conference several presentations touched on Haitian-Dominican border relations. Three studies were particularly important. One (by Jørgen Sørlie Yri) focused on a project implemented to improve relations among Haitian and Dominican youth living in the border areas through various schools activities, exchanges and meetings. Another (by Kimberly Wynne) focused on Haitian migrants working together with Dominicans in a banana *batey* in the Dominican Republic close to the border with Haiti, in which both groups – Haitians and Dominicans – were poor and driven to this activity by economic necessity. The third presentation (by Wenche Hauge) focused on local models of conflict prevention in communities along the Haitian side of the border and how living close to the border affected these communities.

These studies revealed that there is often fear of the other on both the Haitian and Dominican sides. However, whereas much of the fear among Haitians is based on real life experiences, such as being badly treated when trying to cross the border, and the experience of violence against women, the elderly and children, the Dominicans in general were more afraid of aspects they were unfamiliar with in Haitian culture, such as voodoo and negative stereotyped images of Haitians.

However, clearly many different conditions influence these attitudes, such as asymmetry along the border and limited state presence on the Haitian side, which increase the Haitian border population's feeling of insecurity. Furthermore, there is asymmetry in trade, with so-called "binational" markets functioning mainly on the Dominican side, creating difficulties and a feeling of inferiority on the part of Haitians (Doucet, 2012b). On the Dominican side, factors that affected their perceptions of Haitians were the socioeconomic conditions of the (Dominican) group studied and this group's preoccupations with survival, differences between rural and urban areas, and in general a lack of lived experience in Haiti.

Social representation

Linked to the above focus is the issue of social representation, i.e. images that ordinary Haitians and Dominicans

have of each other. Rachele Doucet, one of the few Haitian researchers who have worked on this topic, pointed out that more research has been conducted in the Dominican Republic than in Haiti, but that more Haitians have experience of visiting the Dominican Republic than vice versa. Doucet pointed to two studies, one conducted in Haiti and one in the Dominican Republic. The Haitian study – consisting of a survey in Port-au-Prince – shows that 48.9% of those participating had visited the Dominican Republic (Paquin, 2004). On the other hand, the survey from the Dominican Republic, which was conducted in Santiago, shows that only 1.5% of respondents had visited Haiti and only 6% were interested in doing so (Onè Respe, 1996). Haitians in general had positive attitudes towards Dominicans, but the Dominican media and many Dominican politicians tended to have a negative image of Haitians (Doucet, 2012a). However, these two studies illustrate how important it is to investigate where such attitudes come from, how representative they are of Dominicans' attitudes towards Haitians in general, and how to change these images and attitudes.

In her presentation Colette Lespinasse from Collectif Haitien pour les Migrations et le Développement also pointed to the general feeling of injustice in Haiti after the CT judgment in 2013, because Haitian migrant workers have for many years been wanted in the Dominican Republic as cheap labour in the sugar plantations and have contributed to the economic development of the country. However, recognition of this is still lacking.

The role of civil society

For decades Dominican civil society organisations (CSOs) and representative organisations of Haitian migrants and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry have played an important role in supporting Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in their demands for recognition, documents and citizenship. During the Hispaniola conference Bridget Wooding concluded that social movements that work in different contexts may often hold the key to changing attitudes on this issue. During the 1970s the international human rights regime became involved, looking at the way in which Haitian migrant labour had been treated. This opened up space for the participation of civil society, especially from the 1990s onwards, to become involved in making visible abuses endured by the affected Haitian and Dominican populations.

In general, much attention has been paid to legal processes related to the situation of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in the Dominican Republic. However, as Wooding emphasised, this is insufficient, and the perspective has to be widened. From 2011 civil society in the Dominican Republic has been using a multifaceted strategy, including – in addition to legal means – approaches to the Dominican Congress and the media, and demonstrations. The situation in the Dominican Republic has changed – CSOs have become stronger, as has women's involvement in them – and public opinion has

become more favourable to respecting the rights of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry. This indicates that more research is needed on the role of local civil society in the Dominican Republic in its efforts to improve the situation of these Haitian groups in the country, including from a gender perspective.

Conclusion: needed research

Some aspects of the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic merit more attention in academic research. Important among these is research on how Haitian and Dominican perceptions of and attitudes towards each other are shaped. Following on from this is the question of how negative or indifferent Dominican attitudes towards Haitian migrant workers can be challenged and changed. In this regard, more focus on the role of local civil society is crucial, because for a long time the focus has been on jurisprudence and strategic litigation. While this is important, more attention now needs to be paid to what role Dominican civil society has played in changing attitudes towards Haitians and their families, and how this work can be further strengthened in the future. Another topic that merits more research is the situation in the border areas. Here, factors such as the socioeconomic asymmetry between the two countries, exemplified in skewed border trade, are important. The limited presence of the Haitian state also increases the feeling of insecurity on the Haitian side of the border. These issues all need more attention in future research.

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