



Supporting Brighter Futures for Girls in Haiti

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United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was famous for saying there could be no development without security, no security without development and neither of them without human rights. He urged the nations of the world, and the functioning of the UN machinery, to advance the principles of freedom from want and fear, and freedom to live in dignity.

The Public-Private Alliance Foundation is a non-governmental organization with several United Nations linkages – the Department of Public Information, the Economic and Social Council and the UN Global Compact. Begun within the UN as an ECOSOC initiative, its motto is “Policies into practice.” In Haiti PPAF is working with other organizations to advance health, environment and economic benefits, including solar and biogas for cooking as an alternative to charcoal. In the course of its work PPAF has connected with the Haiti Adolescent Girls Network.

HAGN, as it is called, organizes and maintains special programs for vulnerable girls in the capital city and other locations, and now has a total of some 4,000 participants. HAGN embodies at a very practical level the aims of security, development and human rights, in support of the health, dignity and well-being of girls otherwise at risk of limited schooling, early pregnancy, early marriage, negative self-worth and a bleak future.

Our purpose in this meeting is to broaden awareness of HAGN’s important work, to show it as an example of an innovative approach, and to invite partnerships by those in a position to act – NGOs, government units, businesses and others.

Why HAGN exists and what it does

HAGN was established in the wake of Haiti’s horrific 2010 earthquake, as a collective of local and international partners committed to the empowerment, safety, health, and well-being of girls. HAGN and partners focus on creating safe spaces where girls can regularly meet and build up their social, economic, cognitive, and health-related assets.

Girls in Haiti face many disproportionate and often unrecognized problems, including high rates of discrimination and gender-based violence, under-representation in school enrollment and literacy, inadequate access to health services, shortage of employment opportunities, and the list goes on. Given the neglect of girls in typical children's, youth, or women's programs after the earthquake, and the dearth of organizations working on prevention, risk-mitigation, and empowerment for the most excluded ("bottom 25%") of girls, HAGN founders and partners established a program of weekly gatherings for groups of girls, known as *Espas Pa Mwen* ("My Space" in Creole). In these gatherings girls could learn about sexual and reproductive health and gender relations, build financial literacy and employability, and create friendships with peers and mentors.

Today, HAGN is a Haitian owned- and run-organization that comprises 14 member organizations managing safe space groups for over 4,000 girls and adolescents ages 10 to 19 in four geographic areas. This includes Anse-a-Pitres, in the Southeast, where some of the persons deported from the Dominican Republic subsist in misery.

Access to alternative education

Two features distinguish the HAGN model: (1) A focus on the most vulnerable and off-track girls (out-of-school, married or with children, living with one or neither parent, in-school but two years behind for grade age). These are identified through community surveys. (2) Leadership by local mentors. Groups are facilitated by trained and paid female mentors ages 18-30 who come from the same communities.

HAGN operates on the premise that investing in girls in a way that allows them to realize their potential both upholds their human rights and can shift social norms that impede development outcomes. This approach is drawing participation from grassroots Haitian-led social service and advocacy organizations, large international NGOs, and government and bilateral development institutions.

Because HAGN values local knowledge and expertise and recognizes the strength of collaboration among stakeholders it is developing a sustainable initiative and becoming an important part of the social fabric of Haiti.

Work that includes displaced and refugee populations

Today's panel discussion gives emphasis to displaced and refugee populations. Responding to the crisis that started in 2015 with tens of thousands of Haitians being deported from the Dominican Republic, HAGN started working in the border town of Anse-a-Pitres and its neighboring areas in July 2016. This involved preparing community mapping and household surveys, including where deportees were living in tents. Out of 3,125 households surveyed, 866 girls, ranging from 10 to 24 years of age, were selected for intervention and the creation of weekly meeting groups.

As of 2018 HAGN is piloting an income-generating activity component to its programming there to strengthen participating girls' financial autonomy. Honey production training is scheduled for September 2018 and access to loans for small business is being pursued.

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Collaboration by PPAF and HAGN

In 2017 HAGN invited PPAF to help with a pilot to introduce solar cookers as an innovation for income generation among a selected group in the Port-au-Prince area. The HAGN clubs include efforts to stimulate girls' entrepreneurship, increase their economic security and help break the cycle of poverty through training and seed funding for micro-enterprises.

PPAF responded and encouraged involvement from the solar oven company Solavore LLC and from Solar Cookers International, the world's leading advocate and resource for solar cooking solutions. With the pilot currently in progress and solar ovens in place, 16 girls have been trained and a next group of 10 girls are to be trained in cooking and baking in September 2018. The aim is to test to see if solar ovens are a useful way to help the girls make popular snacks and start their own eco-friendly cooking businesses.

HAGN plans to continue monitoring the girls to see whether this approach achieves the stated purposes and is replicable. The big vision is expansion so that families the program touches will adopt solar cooking and gain the benefits of better health, reduced expenditures on charcoal and improvement of the environment. The mid-term vision is that marginalized girls can learn new skills, develop financial literacy, improve their health, and take steps toward becoming agents of change in their community.

Proposals for support and action

PPAF and HAGN will welcome broader public awareness and organizations' adoption of the "My Space" clubs approach and solar cooking as an option for small scale business. Greater attention to challenges and opportunities in relation to girls, especially marginalized girls is tremendously important. This deserves planning and action by NGOs, government units and businesses alike.

Economic empowerment is an option that must be and has started to be considered. More is needed in vocational training / entrepreneurship training / small business / appropriate income-generating opportunities across the various segments of the population of girls.

Support and action is possible. Great leverage from such investments can be had.