

# Changing perceptions of Haiti

## INTERVIEW WITH DIDIER FILS-AIMÉ

PRESIDENT, CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY, HAITI (CCI)



**DIDIER FILS-AIMÉ** is a graduate of the School of Management of Boston University. He has extensive experience in both the service and industrial sectors and is the founder of one of Haiti's largest Internet service providers, which he ran for twelve years. Mr Fils-Aimé is also the founder of Haiti's only tissue paper converting company and the CEO of an ambitious tourism project on the southern coast. He was elected President of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in November 2012.

**The Martelly-Lamothe administration has adopted the slogan "Haiti is open for business." What does this mean in practical terms?**

"Haiti is open for business" means that the government will take all the necessary steps through the relevant organisations, such as the Haitian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (CCI), and the Center for the Facilitation of Investments (CFI), to make sure that companies looking to invest in this country are helped through the process as quickly as possible.

That said, we have to be realistic; Haiti is a work in progress. I'm not going to deny that there are still problems, or that we sometimes need to respond more quickly to investors. At the same time, the government is always looking at ways to improve the business climate. We already have some of the most business-friendly legislation in the world, and now there is a presidential commission reviewing further investment legislation. We are preparing laws that will change the way we do business. We are taking Haiti's business legislation into the 21st century.

**Are you not concerned that local companies may find themselves unable to compete with foreign players eager to take advantage of the opportunities in Haiti?**

Job creation is very important, and we understand that to achieve this goal we need to attract foreign investments. We also know that these new ventures will require that we increase our skills base. But we also know that the presence of foreign companies obliges local players to up their game, and raises standards

of good governance. This is a good thing for Haiti. Haitian companies will have to adapt and evolve. The important thing for overseas companies to remember is that Haiti needs and wants foreign investments. Haiti is a relatively easy country to do business and by contacting the Chamber of Commerce, they will find it easier still, because we can put them in touch with the right people and guide them through the process.

**How would you assess the level of business confidence in Haiti today?**

The IMF predicted growth of 6 per cent for 2011/12, while the real figure was near 3 per cent, which is still impressive considering that most of the spending done by the NGOs vanished during that period. The overwhelming majority of businesses are doing well, despite the bubble effect on the economy after the earthquake. The huge number of NGOs had inflated the economy. Today we can see clearly the true picture: the numbers are slightly up from the pre-earthquake period. Local investors are building new hotel rooms. Foreign investors are coming in. There are opportunities in Haiti.

**How do you see the economy developing in the medium term?**

Five per cent a year is achievable, but there are factors we have to bear in mind; for example, the hurricane season is coming, and so we need to be sure that our infrastructure is in place. We need inward investment to help with this. The government understands that investors need the right infrastructure, but it also

The apparel sector remains the principal engine of growth for the Haitian economy



understands that there is huge potential for investors in developing that infrastructure, and is open to PPP (Public-Private Partnerships) and BOT (Build, Operate, Transfer), or simply putting out projects to tender.

The service sector has huge potential – one only has to look at the success of Digicel, for example. I know that for many foreign companies it requires a leap of faith to think about investing here, but I want them to know that we can set up the meetings with the right people for them. We can make things happen.

#### **Is there a 'magic bullet' for growth, in your view?**

Not really. It's all about policies: implementing legislation, putting as much of the infrastructure and incentives in place, and then persuading companies that Haiti is a viable investment option. And to some extent, that all takes time. The government is doing all the right things, it is pushing through business-friendly legislation, it is tackling corruption, applying good governance standards. One of our biggest problems is perception. The visitor is struck by the fact that many areas of the capital have still not been cleared, and that in some areas there is no street lighting. But this city is one of the safest in the Caribbean. We have very low crime, for instance. Haiti is a safe place, and a safe place for investments. We need to change the way people look at Haiti.


#### **How important a role is the private sector playing in the economy?**

The members in the Chamber of Commerce contribute more than 90 per cent of the government's tax revenues. The Haitian private sector is run by people who have international experience; most of them have worked or studied abroad. They understand how the global economy works, they understand Haiti's regional role, and its place in the international scheme of things. They also understand how to work with foreign companies, and many of the new ventures are joint ventures, a mix of Haitian and foreign capital.

#### **The Haitian economy is still reliant on a few key sectors, such as textiles and apparel; is it realistic to think in terms of diversifying the economy?**

I think before we talk about diversification, we have to strengthen our formal business sector. By that I mean that 90 per cent of small businesses are still in the informal sector: they don't pay taxes, and they don't contribute to the social security system. We need proper tax collection, we need good governance, and we have to give small businesses a say in the decision-making process by give them a stake in the future. Then we will have the conditions to begin diversifying the economy. Apparel does not employ as many people as it should. There is still work to be done in that sector. The investments in the Caracol industrial park in the north are a big step in the right direction. The real opportunities for diversification in the economy are in the tourist sector and the agricultural sector. I believe the opportunities are endless in the tourism industry, we have great beaches like the other countries in the region but we also have our unique culture and our rich history. As far as the agriculture sector is concerned Haiti's arable lands are under-utilised. With the proper investments there are huge opportunities in that sector not only to produce for the local market but for the Caribbean market as well.

#### **What advice would you offer a would-be-investor?**

My advice to people thinking about investing in Haiti is to take the time to get to know Haiti, don't just fly in for half a day: come for three or four days – and contact us first. We will arrange meetings, show you around, put you in touch with the right people, the people on the ground. Get in touch with the CFI, get out there and have a proper look around. If the CEO can't stay for that long, then at least leave a team that can gather information and get a feel for the place. Because anybody who takes the time to get to know Haiti will see the huge potential here. 

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The agricultural sector offers significant opportunities for Haiti to diversify its economy



Photography: Thierry Bijou