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Beyond the Duvalier Legacy: What New "Arab Spring" Governments Can Learn from Haiti and the Benefits of Stolen Asset Recovery

Mark V. Vlasic & Gregory Cooper¹

In the post-"Arab Spring" world, stolen asset recovery is quickly emerging as one of the more high profile aspects of the global fight against corruption and promoting the "rule of law." Typically based on allegations of wrongdoing by presidents, prime ministers, and dictators—enriching themselves through corruption, theft, embezzlement, bribery, and self-dealing at the expense of their people—senior-level grand corruption cases form an integral part of the histories of many developing countries in the 20th century.

Often limiting national economic growth, grand corruption creates countless hardships that fall largely on the poor.² In the past century, such theft has financed the lavish lifestyles for a few corrupt elite. But even more problematic is the fact that corrupt political leaders have used illicit assets to secure political power through co-option—bribing individuals to cooperate or paying for the elimination of those who would not. From Haiti's Jean Claude Duvalier to Nigeria's Sani Abacha to the Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos, leaders have hidden their vast wealth by keeping it offshore in countries with strong banking secrecy provisions. Consequently, they have frustrated the pursuits of successor governments' law enforcement officials, forcing them to sift through a maze of shell companies, false names, and bank accounts, while requiring cooperation from often indifferent foreign states.

The process of recovering stolen monies from corrupt leaders—known as 'stolen asset recovery'—is filled with legal and practical difficulties, including insufficient legal precedent, lack of cooperation from offshore financial centers, and domestic political interference. Asset recovery efforts may also be jeopardized because of the difficulty of proving criminal conduct when leaders are dead or have fled the country.³

Despite the billions of dollars involved, recovering stolen assets is not focused simply on money. It may also be seen as a tool to aid in deterrence as well as in fighting the impunity that is

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² VICTORIA JENNETT, CHR. MICHELSEN INSTITUTE, U4 EXPERT ANSWER: SUMMARIES OF LITERATURE ON COSTS OF CORRUPTION 1 (Robin Hodess, Transparency International, ed., 2007), *available at* http://www.u4.no/helpdesk/helpdesk/query.cfm?id=138.

³ Jack Smith, Mark Pieth & Guillermo Jorge, Basel Institute on Governance, U4 Brief: The Recovery of Stolen Assets: A Fundamental Principle of the UN Convention Against Corruption 3 (2007), available at http://www.u4.no/themes/uncac/asset-recovery.cfm.

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so often associated with financial crime. Indeed, in many cases, stolen asset recovery serves three distinct purposes: recovering monies to fund governments programs and initiatives that help their people, providing a semblance of justice for victims while often challenging a political culture of impunity, and deterring officials from engaging in future corruption.⁴ Although challenging to accomplish, such purposes are perceived as worthwhile by many in the development, human rights, and law enforcement communities.

Indeed, all three of these communities are currently involved in a particular ongoing exercise in asset recovery that has seen various amounts of international attention over the last year: the case of former Haitian President Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. For better or worse, Duvalier—his kleptocratic rule, legendary escape into exile, subsequent struggle to retain his allegedly plundered millions, and recent return to Haiti—serves as an interesting case study on the connection between politics, poverty, corruption, and stolen asset recovery issues. Considering the grand corruption allegations involving such recently deposed leaders as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Moammar Gaddafi of Libya, this article suggests that a review of the Duvalier matter—including the links between poverty and corruption and the subsequent efforts to recover Duvalier's assets—may provide some "lessons learned" to future corruption hunters working in the wake of the "Arab Spring."

I. HAITI AND THE LINKS BETWEEN CORRUPTION AND POVERTY

Haiti has many challenges, but it was not supernaturally cursed to be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. One major factor for its plight is Haiti's consistent inability to combat government corruption.⁵

Even before the 2010 earthquake wiped out most of its infrastructure, Haiti's businesses struggled because innovation, investment, and efficiency were often discouraged. According to many experts, corruption was and likely will continue to be Haiti's most serious long-term problem. Such a problem cannot be measured solely by the amounts of government funds embezzled or bribes received, but must take into consideration the numerous negative social, cultural, and political impacts it has on Haiti. Nevertheless, some numbers do capture the magnitude of the theft; a joint report by the World Bank and United Nations suggests that Duvalier stole the equivalent of approximately 1.7 to 4.5 percent of Haiti's entire GDP for every year he was in power.

Under the Duvalier regime that lasted from 1971 until 1986, economic growth stagnated, poverty increased, and the legitimized use of violence by the *Tonton Macoute* secret police led to a constant state of fear. Having taken over the "Presidency-For-Life" after his father's death in 1971, Duvalier's rule is sometimes characterized as a combination of greed and laziness, resulting in a paralysis of national development.⁸

⁴ Interview with Jack D. Smith, President, Repatriation Group International (June 9, 2009).

⁵ Jack D. Smith, George Washington University Law School, *A Day for Haiti Event: Ensuring Lawfulness and Transparency of Rebuilding* (Apr. 12, 2010), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_FLyGA2brg.

⁶ See Robert Klitgaard, Addressing Corruption in Haiti 14 (Am. Enter. Institute, Working Paper Series on Development Policy, Nov. 2, 2010), http://www.aei.org/docLib/AddressingSystemicCorruptioninHaiti.pdf.

⁷ U.N. OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME & WORLD BANK, STOLEN ASSET RECOVERY (STAR) INITIATIVE: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND ACTION PLAN 10 (2007), *available at* http://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/StAR-Sept07-full.pdf.

⁸ Kris Hinterseer, Criminal Finance: The Political Economy of Money Laundering in a Comparative Legal Context 61 (2002).

For fifteen years, Duvalier was allegedly stealing Haitian and international donor money while exploiting his people for the benefit of sugar companies. These assets allegedly paid for luxury cars, large quantities of jewelry, as well as high-end vacations and property in Europe. Duvalier gave up the "Presidency-for-Life" only when faced with the near total breakdown of the Haitian state, which was evidenced by rioting and a potential *coup d'état*. Duvalier's consolation prize was a comfortable exile in France, where he relied on stashed assets and continued living the lifestyle to which he had been accustomed.

II. ASSET RECOVERY AS A MEANS TO TACKLE CORRUPTION

Tragically, Haiti's poverty at the hands of a few ruling elite is not unique, but rather a worldwide problem. Too often, such grand corruption cases go unpunished. In a few rare cases, however, corrupt individuals and their beneficiaries have been brought to account and countries have been able to use the asset recovery process to recover a significant portion of stolen state assets. For example, almost thirty years of tracing assets hidden by Ferdinand Marcos led to the Philippines' success in recovering \$1.8 billion in foreign and domestic assets. Similarly, Nigerian asset recovery efforts against former President Sani Abacha led to the recovery of nearly \$1.9 billion in stolen assets.

In the years following these legendary asset recovery successes, enhanced law enforcement tools, as well as increased capacity, and improved international cooperation from well-meaning countries and financial centers have helped further the fight against impunity.

Of the handful of legacy asset recovery cases of the 20th century, such as Abacha and Marcos, whose alleged financial plunders are unequalled, the case of Duvalier is still unfolding. A subject of protracted legal maneuvering and litigation for decades, Swiss, Haitian, World Bank and United Nations efforts to freeze and repatriate Duvalier's allegedly illicit assets are once again in the spotlight.

This spotlight was activated in early 2011 when Duvalier, after twenty-five years of exile in France, returned to Haiti just days before a new Swiss law came into effect that would enable the return of his frozen assets to Haiti. Despite recent high-level attention to the matter,

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⁹ ELIZABETH ABBOTT, HAITI: THE DUVALIERS AND THEIR LEGACY 278-79 (1991).

¹⁰ Id. at 250

¹¹ Kim Willsher, *Jean-Claude Duvalier's Turbulent Years in Exile*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 17, 2011), http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/17/jean-claude-duvalier-baby-doc.

¹² Siri Schubert, *Haiti: The Long Road to Recovery*, PBS FRONTLINE (May 22, 2009),

http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/bribe/2009/05/haiti-the-long-road-to-recovery.html.

¹³ Philippines recovers US\$1.8b from Marcos, INTELLASIA | AFP (Mar. 5, 2009),

http://www.intellasia.net/news/articles/regional/111259593.shtml

¹⁴ Ali M. Ali, U.S. \$450 Million Abacha Loot 'Can't Be Traced' (May 21, 2009),

http://allafrica.com/stories/200905210132.html; The Basel Institute on Governance's Asset Recovery Knowledge Centre contains a detailed description of the Abacha and Marcos recoveries efforts. *See also* Basel Institute on Governance, *Chronology (Draft): Efforts in Switzerland to Recover Assets Looted By Sani Abacha of Nigeria* (2007), http://www.assetrecovery.org/kc/resources/org.apache.wicket.Application/repo?nid=78488349-a33e-11dc-bf1b-335d0754ba85; Basel Institute on Governance, *Chronology (Draft): Efforts to Recover Assets Looted By Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines* (2007),

http://www.assetrecovery.org/kc/resources/org.apache.wicket. Application/repo?nid=62506d95-a33e-11dc-bf1b-335d0754ba85.

¹⁵ Baby Doc Assets Law Set To Enter Into Force, SWISSINFO.CH (Jan. 17, 2011), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-11943820.

however, the Duvalier case, like many asset recovery cases, has been a slow and laborious process that has taken decades to unfold.¹⁶

III. INITIAL ASSET RECOVERY PROCEEDINGS AGAINST DUVALIER

While there was great interest in asset recovery at the beginning of Duvalier's exile, the vast majority of Duvalier's assets were never recovered, largely due to two major setbacks. First, a French civil court dismissed Haiti's recovery efforts for \$120 million in 1987, leaving his assets in France untouched.¹⁷ Second, and perhaps more important, Haiti's deteriorating political situation led to the weakening of political will to continue pursuing Duvalier's illicit assets.

This lack of political will was highlighted in 1989 by an attorney working on Duvalier's case on behalf of the Haitian government. According to *The New York Times*, despite sending twenty-five requests for assistance to Haitian officials regarding cases in New York, by September 1988, Haiti's government had "inexplicably stopped cooperating—and, not so incidentally, stopped paying its legal bills." A letter from Haiti's outside counsel to Haiti's then Prime Minister, Prosper Avril, underlines the frustration:

The behavior of your ministers leaves us no alternative except to conclude that your ministers apparently want our efforts on behalf of Haiti to fail, are not concerned that Haiti will lose the substantial investment it has made in pursuing the Duvaliers, and want the Duvaliers to keep the money they stole.¹⁹

Later asset recovery efforts in the United States, renewed by the Haitian government of President Aristide, yielded only minimal results, with the most well-known being the recovery of \$350,000 from Duvalier's wife's account at the Bank of New York.²⁰ Some believe that, had Haiti not dropped the original Duvalier asset recovery, the Haitian government could have recovered between \$25 and \$75 million by 1990.²¹ Instead, the resulting debacle left Duvalier free and the majority of his assets untouched. Meanwhile, Haiti was stuck with a 1.2 million dollar legal bill and with justice denied.²²

The outcome in Haiti is not unusual. Many countries are deterred from instituting recoveries based on the threat or actual absence of political will and incompatible or uncaring foreign legal systems. To enforce a recovery, for example, many countries require a criminal conviction, which could be impossible to obtain if the perpetrator is dead or in exile, or if a conviction would cause significant political unrest in a country, as in the case of President Daniel

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¹⁶ 'Lex Duvalier' Enables Switzerland to Confiscate and Repatriate Illicit Dictator Assets, MERCOPRESS (Feb. 2, 2011), http://en.mercopress.com/201/02/02/lex-duvalier-enables-switzerland-to-confiscate-and-repatriate-illicit-dictator-assets.

¹⁷ Jonathan Randal, *Haiti Loses Lawsuit Against Duvalier: French Court Sets Back Bid to Recover \$150 Million*, WASH. POST, Jun. 24, 1987, at A22.

¹⁸ David Margolick, *At the Bar: Law firm, in Pursuit of Haitian Property, Finds the Chase Can Be Tedious and Frustrating*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 27, 1989, at B7.

²⁰ Yvette Collymore, *HAITI: U.S. Court Moves Against Duvalier Assets*, INTER PRESS SERVICE (Jan. 3, 1996), http://ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=66324.

²¹ Margolick, *supra* note 18.

²² Frederic Dannen, *Life-Styles of the Rich and Infamous*, VANITY FAIR, Apr. 1992, at 78.

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Arap Moi in Kenya.²³ Absent a criminal process, legal systems of these countries may prevent any forfeiture of assets.

IV. ADVANCES IN ASSET RECOVERY AND THE DUVALIER CASE

A. The international community focuses greater attention on grand corruption

Since the failure of the early Duvalier recovery efforts, the international community has strengthened its commitment to fight grand corruption, regulate the role of offshore financial centers, and engage in asset recovery.²⁴ In addition to increased financial controls and mandatory diligence procedures in much of the banking industry (largely in response to international terrorism), a turning point came in 2005 when 140 countries signed the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the world's first truly global treaty against corruption.²⁵

More recently, the international community has become increasingly focused on asset recovery. In September 2007, the World Bank President, Robert Zoellick, and the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, launched the Stolen Asset Recovery (StAR) Initiative at the United Nations General Assembly. Designed as a unique joint World Bank-United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) partnership, StAR was established to help developing countries track down and recover stolen assets from past grand corruption cases.²⁶

Unlike many initiatives launched at the U.N. General Assembly, what may have made StAR unique is that it was also Zoellick's first initiative at the Bank. With Zoellick's energetic backing and support, StAR and the concept of "asset recovery" were subsequently included into numerous G-20 statements and commitments. As a result, some of the most influential countries and national leaders in the world have signed on to the link between development, poverty, and fighting corruption with stolen asset recovery, thereby elevating asset recovery to the forefront of the development agenda.²⁷

One of StAR's first asset recovery cases involved working with Haiti's new leadership and Swiss authorities to help recover approximately \$5.7 million of Duvalier's assets frozen in Switzerland²⁸—an effort that had begun years earlier, but which was getting a second chance due

²³ Daniel Arap Moi served as the President of Kenya from 1978 until his resignation amid mass protests in 2002. Five years later, news organizations reportedly obtained a copy of a leaked draft report that alleged Moi had siphoned off over £ 1 billion of government money. *See* Xan Rice, *The Looting of Kenya*, THE GUARDIAN (Aug. 31, 2007), *available at* http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/31/kenya.topstories3.

²⁴ Why StAR? Why Now? in STOLEN ASSET RECOVERY (STAR) INITIATIVE: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND ACTION PLAN 5 (June 2007), available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NEWS/Resources/Star-rep-full.pdf. ²⁵ United Nations Convention Against Corruption, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CAC/index.html (last visited Apr. 5, 2011).

Office of the President, Presentation to the United Nation: Launch of Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative (Sept. 17, 2007), http://go.worldbank.org/U2ZCWCDKR0.
 StAR Website, http://www.worldbank.org/star (last visited Aug. 19, 2011). The G20 2010 emphasizes asset

recovery in its Anti-Corruption Action Plan. *See* Government of Canada, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *The G20 Seoul Summit Leader's Declaration* (Nov. 22, 2010), http://www.canadainternational.qc.ca/g20/summit-sommet/2010/g20_seoul_declaration.aspx?lang=eng&menu_id=41&menu=L&view=d. *See also* Government of Canada, *Annex III – G20 Anti-Corruption Action Plan* (Nov. 22, 2010), *available at* http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/g20/summit-sommet/2010/G20_seoul_annex-annexes% 203.aspx?view=d.

²⁸ Mark V. Vlasic & Jenae N. Noell, *Fighting impunity: Recent international asset recovery efforts to combat corruption*, CAYMAN FINANCIAL REVIEW, Jan. 5, 2010, http://www.compasscayman.com/cfr/2010/01/05/Fighting-impunity--Recent-international-asset-recovery-efforts-to-combat-corruption/#comment.

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to enlightened leadership on all sides. In this renewed effort, Swiss authorities sought to confiscate Duvalier's assets and return them to Haiti to support non-profit humanitarian organizations while simultaneously sparring against Duvalier's legislative efforts to lift the freezing order.

B. Swiss double their efforts to confiscate assets via new legislation

A "perfect storm" of positive factors, including a supportive Haitian government and a helpful StAR Initiative, combined with Swiss determination to resolve the Duvalier matter once and for all, has led to significant legal successes in Switzerland. Many of these successes have occurred in the last twenty-four months due to the hard work of a handful of Swiss officials working with individuals from Haiti and the StAR Initiative.

In 2010, Swiss officials took the exceptional step of re-freezing Duvalier's assets using the government's foreign policy powers²⁹ while it crafted a new legislative "fix" to the Duvalier asset recovery matter—a retroactive law that focused on corrupt assets from fragile states.³⁰ The Restitution of Illicit Assets Act (RIAA) was passed by the Swiss Parliament in October 2010 and officially came into effect on February 1, 2011. The RIAA, also known as *Lex Duvalier*, was designed for matters involving assets frozen in Switzerland that have been acquired unlawfully but cannot be returned through typical international mutual legal assistance channels due to failures in the victim state's (the country from which the assets were stolen) judicial system.

Specifically, the RIAA allows for asset confiscation in situations where the current state of the victim country renders it impossible to conduct a proper exchange procedure via traditional judicial procedures. In these cases, the RIAA would allow a unique "burden shift," requiring the Swiss government to show that: (1) the funds held in Switzerland by an alleged corrupt official are significantly larger than what someone could have credibly earned in office; and that (2) the country from which the funds originate is known to be corrupt. The burden of proving that the money came from legal sources would then shift to the allegedly corrupt official, rather than the Swiss state. If the official could not prove a legitimate origin of his or her Swiss assets, those assets would be confiscated by the Swiss state.

In an odd twist of events, about a week before the new RIAA came into effect in Switzerland, Duvalier chose to emerge from the shadows and his exile in France and return to Haiti. While some of his supporters claimed that he wanted to return to help rebuild his earthquake-ravaged country, some thought it odd that he would wait over a year after the earthquake to return and do so.³¹ Despite his return, Swiss officials are optimistic that the RIAA will work as intended and provide for a successful recovery of the Haitian assets.³²

²⁹ BUNDESVERFASSUNG [BV] [CONSTITUTION] Dec. 18, 1998, art. 184 (Switz.) (The power to freeze assets is granted to Swiss Federal Council under this article.).

³⁰ Swiss Court Reverses Award of Duvalier Millions, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS (Feb. 4, 2010), http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/world/americas/04duvalier.html.

³¹ Trenton Daniel, *Observers: Duvalier's return to Haiti puzzling*, MIAMI HERALD (Jan. 17, 2011), http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/01/17/2019547/observers-duvaliers-return-puzzling.html. *See also* Mark Vlasic, 5.7 *Million Reasons to Return to Haiti*, HUFFINGTON POST (Feb. 4, 2011), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-v-vlasic/57-million-reasons-for-du b 817459.html.

³² FAQ: New Act on the Restitution of Illicit Assets (RIAA), FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (July 26, 2011), http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/topics/finec/intcr/poexp/faqria.0008.html.

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V. LESSONS FOR FUTURE "ARAB SPRING"-RELATED CASES: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNCAC AND GLOBAL COOPERATION

The success of possible future asset recovery cases resulting from the "Arab Spring," such as the Gaddafi case, rely, in large part, on the current efforts of forward-leaning countries—such as the United States and Switzerland—that are actively taking measures to freeze possible illicit assets. Sadly, not every country is as forward-leaning.

While no one expects every U.N. member state to design new laws to resolve decades-long asset recovery cases, or be the most forward-leaning regarding international sanctions programs and asset freezing orders, simply ratifying the UNCAC is a step in the right direction. Yet, many countries have not ratified the UNCAC nor do they have the proper legal tools in place to cooperate on asset recovery cases. This presents serious challenges to asset recovery practitioners. One aspect of StAR's work is therefore to encourage more countries to ratify the UNCAC.

Even with the UNCAC in place, the challenges presented by corruption investigations and asset recovery operations are immense. Tax haven jurisdictions often present challenges to investigators while in many countries the political will to initiate and cooperate in asset recovery cases is limited. Added to this, sometimes there is reluctance on the part of victim countries to rely on foreign experts to do the investigation and legal work; many see it as ceding their national sovereignty. Therefore, what is needed is both increased cooperation with international legal experts as well as building local capacities to work successfully on stolen asset recovery in respective countries.

In many ways, the United Nations Security Resolution that enabled the worldwide freezing of Gaddafi's assets has served as a significant test of the international community's ability to coordinate future asset recovery operations.³³ If the Duvalier case is any example, the concern for those involved in the "Arab Spring"-related asset recovery operations will be how to ensure continued political will to sustain such operations—and to maintain the international cooperation necessary to follow up on all available leads in a timely matter. One hopes that they will look at the Duvalier matter for guidance. Asset recovery operations should be based on broad political support to sustain such efforts. They also should engage outside and international assistance to bridge capacity gaps quickly so that strategic momentum is not lost on the countless priorities that face a transitioning government.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the years to come, historians and legal scholars will determine whether or not the Duvalier case provided any true guidance for transitioning governments arising out of the "Arab Spring." What is certain, however, is that much good has come from the renewed effort to recover his assets for the benefit of the Haitian people. From a global perspective, the StAR Initiative's work in fostering cooperation between countries, North and South, provides a blueprint for future advocacy in grand corruption cases. At the same time, by designing the RIAA legislation, Switzerland has gained a reputation as a world leader in asset recovery, and in many ways, it now serves as a model to other countries.

³³ See U.S., U.N., U.K., E.U. Freeze Gadhafi's Assets, WSJ.COM CORRUPTION CURRENTS BLOG (Feb. 28, 2011), http://blogs.wsj.com/corruption-currents/2011/02/28/u-s-u-n-u-k-e-u-freeze-ghadafis-assets/ (Overview of the Gaddafi freeze).

On the domestic front in Haiti, the Duvalier matter has helped Haitian authorities gain valuable anticorruption experience—from learning critical mutual legal assistance techniques, to building critical international networks, to increasing the likelihood of future prosecution of corrupt leaders.³⁴ In the future, Haitian officials might use their experience in the Duvalier matter to help other developing countries with their asset recovery cases—providing ever-helpful South-South cooperation and training.

Furthermore, from a moral and policy perspective, the Duvalier case will hopefully inspire and empower government leaders and their public constituencies to pursue asset recovery cases, despite the challenges that are inherent in their operation. Indeed, a critical aspect in fighting the impunity that is so often associated with economic crime, is to disgorge deposed leaders of their illicit fortunes. Not only does asset recovery bring some sense of justice, but hopefully the exemplary effect of denying corrupt leaders the benefits of their corruption will also inspire successor leaders to act honestly and with integrity. Indeed, only by holding our leaders to the highest standards can we ensure that citizens receive the good governance that they deserve.

³⁴ *Training on Corruption in Haiti*, BASEL INSTITUTE ON GOVERNANCE (May 19, 2009), http://www.baselgovernance.org/big/news-single-view/article/training-on-corruption-in-haiti/?tx_ttnews[backPid]=295&cHash=ad3f8ec6ed.