Sacrifice Zone – Île à Vache, Haiti

1. Submission by: Erin Daly, James R. May, and Andrea Scarpello, Dignity Rights International
3. Location: Île à Vache, Haïti
4. Description of the sacrifice zone:

The island of Île à Vache lies off the southern coast of Haiti. The people who live in the local rural community engage in agriculture, cattle-raising, and fishing activities for their survival. After years of total neglect from the government, and in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, the Haitian Government launched “Destination Île-à-Vache” – an ecotourism mega-project that the government promised would boost the local economy and improve living conditions by promoting the island’s touristic attractivity to wealthy foreign visitors and investors.

The ecotourism plan, which originally envisioned several large-scale infrastructure projects including luxury hotels, golf courses, and island farms, resulted only in the construction of an international airport and an unpaved road before it was abandoned in 2015. Today, six years later, it remains fully inoperative, a blight on the landscape and in people’s lives. During the construction of the airport, members of the local community, whose subsistence relies on the seasonal availability and use of their lands, were dispossessed of their lands and homes when governmental authorities forced evictions and illegal lending contracts. They did not involve or consult with members of the local community in the design or implementation of the mega-project; instead, they used intimidation, violence, and misinformation to suppress and stifle community opposition to the project. This neglect and hostility contributed to strong opposition by the communities supported by local and external human rights associations, but was ultimately fruitless.

The project caused significant socio-environmental impacts that are still felt today. The construction of the unused airport caused severe deforestation and the destruction of mangroves, which damaged marine and terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystems on and around the island. The damage to the environment in turn threatened people’s livelihoods and adversely impacted their lives by hindering their capacity to work, critically deepening their food insecurity, increasing malnutrition and poverty, and causing widespread forced internal displacement. The irreversible damage to the environment has also dramatically impacted local people’s capacity to adapt to climate change events such as hurricanes and sea level rise, which constitute an overwhelming and growing threat for the lives of people on the island.

5. Evidence that this sacrifice zone is contributing to human rights abuses or violations:

Despite the abandonment of the project in 2015, it has contributed to violations of environmental and human rights that are felt to this day. The lack of governmental efforts and will to restore the profoundly degraded environment, biodiversity, and ecosystems on the island still threatens peoples’ rights to a healthy environment, life, dignity, adequate housing, family life, water, and food. Moreover, the widespread unsustainable use of lands and ecosystems, the destruction of mangroves and large-scale deforestation due to the construction of the inoperative airport, still negatively affects peoples’ short and long-term capacity to cope with and adapt to climate change impacts, such as sea level rise and hurricanes.

At the same time, the government has failed to establish any grievance or accountability mechanisms for people to obtain compensation or remedy for the widespread human rights violations and
environmental degradation carried out during the project. This not only violates procedural and substantive human rights but also contributes to the general perception of impunity, corruption, and neglect on the island.

The human dislocation and degradation of the land and waters has prevented members of the local community from reestablishing their previous practices of traditional agricultural, fishing and market activities that are essential for their subsistence, dignity, and well-being. Moreover, continuing conflict has fueled sometimes violent encounters between local inhabitants and government authorities. It has perpetuated internal displacement among the poor and new land ownership opportunities for the wealthier classes, which in turn has led to forced and illegal labor relationships between new landowners and low-income farmers, who work under deplorable conditions and are paid inadequately to conduct a sufficiently decent living for them and their families. Lands that are returned to original landowners are often unproductive, as fruit trees and plants have been damaged or destroyed by irregular expropriators, affecting rural farmers’ capacity to be food independent and impeding their access to local markets in order to sell their products and make a living.

Considering the multiple short- and long-term adverse effects caused by the mega-project and its abandonment, and the adverse impacts on the fundamental rights of the people living in Île à Vache, the Haitian government is in breach of its responsibility to protect the rights of the Haitian people under Article 1 of the American Convention on Human Rights (American Convention). Moreover, it has infringed peoples’ right to dignity (Article 11.1); the right to progressive realization of economic, social, and cultural rights (Article 26); the right to life (Article 4); the right to equal access to public services (Article 23.1.c); the right to personal liberty and security (Article 7.1); the rights of the family to be protected by the society and the state (Article 17.1); the right to equal protection (Article 24); the right to have physical, mental, and moral integrity respected (Article 5.1); and the right to judicial protection and remedy (Article 25.1.2), enshrined under the American Convention.

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Haitian government is in breach of its responsibility to provide and enforce effective remedy mechanisms (Article 2.a, 2.b, 2.c). Moreover, it has violated several of the rights enshrined under the ICCPR, such as peoples’ rights to pursue their economic, social and cultural development (Article 1.1); to dispose of their natural wealth and resource and not to be deprived of their own means of subsistence (Article 1.2); to life (Article 6.1); not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 7); to liberty and security (Article 9.1); to be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal (article 14.1); not to be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, home and to receive protection from such threats (Article 17.1, 17.2); to freedom of expression (Article 19.2); to freedom of association (Article 22.1); to non-discrimination (Article 26).

Finally, under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Haitian government has violated peoples’ rights to work (Article 6.1); to enjoy just and favorable conditions of work (Article 7); to family protection and assistance (Article 10.1); to an adequate standard of living, such as to be food and housing secure (Article 11.1); and to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Article 12.1).

6. Efforts to clean up or rehabilitate the sacrifice zone:

Efforts to stop the project and rehabilitate the area have mainly come from local communities, supported both by local NGOs and external actors coming from the capital city, Port-au-Prince.

In 2014, a delegation of civil society organisations (CSOs) including Défenseurs des Opprimés (DOP), the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organisations (POHDH), the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH) and the Collective for Housing Rights visited Île-à-Vache to examine
human rights violations on the island. Such organizations gathered with local groups involved in the resistance, such as Action Citoyenne pour l’Île-à-Vache (ACI), KOPI, Oganizasyon Fanm Ilavach (OFAIV), demanding that national authorities include local community members in the planning, development, and implementation of the project and thus to respond to their concerns and needs.

The lack of response from national authorities and the continuation of the project in disregard of the demands of local communities has led to the structuring of several opposition initiatives, such as awareness-raising, capacity building, and information sharing activities, involving local educational groups and church representatives, women, farmers, and youth, as well as members of student, workers and peoples’ organizations coming from outside the community. Moreover, supporting documents for opposition have been translated from French to Creole to ensure that information is accessible, inclusive, and transparent to all members of the local community. Local movies, documentaries have also been instrumental in the fight against governmental propaganda and to increase peoples’ consciousness regarding the impacts of the project on their daily life and fundamental rights.

Nonetheless, governmental authorities and the military have sometimes met local opposition with violent, discriminatory, and life-threatening practices, ranging from beatings, threats, and intimidation, to arbitrary incarcerations of members of the local community, activists, and human rights defenders. Authorities have also attempted to undermine and delegitimize opposition by spreading disinformation among the protesters, claiming their alleged involvement in drug smuggling activities.

To this day, the island is strongly militarized, and governmental intimidations and threats continue to undermine peoples’ capacity and rights to access to their lands and houses, to live in dignity, to work, to access to adequate food and water, to protest, to be protected and to obtain reparation before competent and impartial authorities.

7. References:

- Osna, Walner (2020). « Une analyse sociohistorique de la résistance paysanne de l’Île à Vache (Haïti) face au projet de développement (éco) touristique de l’État. »
  https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/41198/1/Osna_Walner_2020_th%C3%A8se.pdf