

Can quake-hit Haiti manufacture itself a high-tech future?

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI: The phrase is used so often it has become a cliché - Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas - but even so it fails to capture the stark reality five years after a devastating earthquake...



The 2010 earthquake hit Haiti hard, but there are some who think that the country can recover and has the potential to become a player in high-tech manufacturing and be the future "Taiwan of the Caribbean". (Image: Public Domain)

Haiti's per capita GDP is the 209th lowest in the world, less than that of Sierra Leone, North Korea or Bangladesh. The money sent home by Haitians living abroad is worth five times more than its exports.

The 2010 earthquake and later cholera epidemic were only the latest blows to a Caribbean republic that suffered from brutal colonialism - France forced its slaves to pay reparations for rising against it - and domestic misrule.

But some see potential.

Haiti is a low-wage economy lying just South of the huge US market and just North of the emerging economies of Latin America, some have even spoke of its becoming a manufacturing "Taiwan of the Caribbean".

If that sounds implausible on the anniversary of a disaster that killed more that 300,000 people, no one has told Surtab, a firm that opened in June 2013 to produce its own brand of Android tablets in the capital Port-au-Prince.

The firm boasts that since opening, it has expanded production to 20,000 units last year for the local, Caribbean and African markets and now provides skilled employment for 60 Haitian workers, despite the stigma of its location.

Suspicious

General manager Diderot Musset says Surtab hopes to triple production in 2015, but admits that even Haitians are

suspicious of the firm's claims.

"Until they get here and look at the installations, they don't believe that we are really doing this in Haiti," he told AFP.

"We even had workers who would go home and say that's what they're doing, and people not believing them, you know: 'You're not making this!'

"So they had to bring a tablet home and say, 'Okay, yeah, I made this,' and still someone would ask, 'Can you disassemble and reassemble it right now?'"

And it's not just a question of perception. Haiti does present severe practical challenges for would-be entrepreneurs, especially in manufacturing.

As AFP was touring the Surtab plant, with its high-tech "clean room" for assembling the wireless devices - a cheap means for Haitians to get online - the power from the nation's rickety electric grid cut out.

Around half of the Haitian government's income comes from foreign donors of one sort or another and the promised flood of aid in the wake of the 2010 quake never fully materialised or was used up quickly in emergency measures.

There has been a recovery, however, despite an ongoing political crisis, and President Michel Martelly's government is bullish about economic opportunity.

The government likes to show off infrastructure projects like the new airport in Cap Haitien it hopes will attract tourists, and Haitians proudly show off local products like the Prestige beer flowing from the capital's rebuilt brewery.

But is this enough of a basis to dream of replacing the old "poorest country" tag with a new "Taiwan of the Caribbean" cliché? Not so fast.

Low-wage manufacturing jobs allow employees to drag some lucky families out of penury, but 80% of Haitians live below the poverty line and a modern mixed economy needs a finance and service sector. Robert Maguire, a former US State Department analyst at the Elliott School of International Affairs, is cautious about the Surtab example.

"I'm not sure that an economy based upon just people sitting in a factory all of the time is a real way to develop a country, absent other elements of the economy," he said.

"It can be a part of the solution, but too often I think it's seen as the solution."

Surtab is proud that its performance-based salaries come out at more than one-and-a-half times Haiti's minimum wage, but its workers grumble that it is not always a steady source of income.

"Compared between when the production line is going and when it's not, that's two different things," said Farah Tilus.

"Surtab pays a base salary that's very low - seriously low - but they offer an opportunity that we can... make the most of."

Nevertheless, after all the country has been through, there is a certain pride that comes from seeing each tablet bearing the stamp "Made in Haiti."

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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