

Cryptocurrency comes to Haiti



BY J.O. HASELHOEF AND LARISA KARRMAY. 24, 2022



Many hope that cryptocurrency will be the solution for those who have little or no access to the financial system like these women vendors in Haiti. Photo by Leslie Mullin

As cryptocurrency makes the rounds across the globe, its buzz has reached Haiti in the form of donations and nascent projects. In this series, The Haitian Times takes a look at a few players and the pros and cons if digital currencies were to take root in Haiti.

WISCONSIN — Imagine. A delivery truck rumbles into the center of a remote village in Haiti and halts to a stop, where a group of vendors, mostly women, stand waiting with a plastic crate of yams harvested from their gardens. The driver gets out, scans a barcode on each box, dumps the yams onto the truck's scale, inputs the weight into a tablet, returns the container.

Moments later, the vendor's phone dings, notifying her that payment for the yams just weighed has been deposited to her account.

Sounds too futuristic? Many say not so. It's a reality in the cryptocurrency world, one that many in the financial, nonprofit and government sectors hope can revolutionize Haiti's [financial system](#) — the institutions and practices that support a country's exchange of money. They say parts of the yam vendors scenario — the objectives and initial technology — are already in place. Other components — such as governmental regulations, central bank acceptance of crypto as legal tender, reliable accessibility to funds — are yet to be worked out.

About 68 percent of Haiti's population has no access to formal financial infrastructure or banks, according to Iwa Salami, co-director of the [Centre of FinTech](#) at the [University of East London](#) with expertise in economic integration law in emerging markets. Cryptocurrency can help move Haitians into a digital financial system.

"If this is done correctly, the characteristics of blockchain technology," the digital interface on which cryptocurrency is built, "facilitates things like transparency," Salami said in an interview. "It can so profoundly facilitate the ability for governments around the world to actually access capital markets — global capital markets — and, also, to attract foreign direct investments."

Currently, many Haitians involved in agricultural markets have to rely on selling goods piecemeal in exchange for tangible gourdes. With cryptocurrency, these vendors would have access to international customers to sell their produce directly to them — offering an [avenue](#) in which outside money adds to the Haitian economy.

Some companies and organizations are already jumping on the potential that they see the Haitian crypto landscape will offer. [Dash](#), a cryptocurrency, is partnering with [Danielle Saint-Lot Haiti Women's Foundation](#) to develop a project similar to the yam marketplace scenario. [Hope for Haiti](#), an international development organization operating in southern Haiti, began accepting donations in cryptocurrency three years ago. And this past March, the [Embassy of Haiti](#) sponsored its second of four webinars on the topic — the most recent one called [Fueling Haiti's Emerging Innovation Economy](#).

"Digital infrastructure is critical to Haiti's long-term recovery as we transition from relief to reconstruction," said Edmond Bocchit, Haiti's ambassador to the U.S. in opening remarks for the webinar. "Haiti will need to expand its footprint in research and development and the technologies of the future so that we can position the country to compete in the international and global innovation economy."

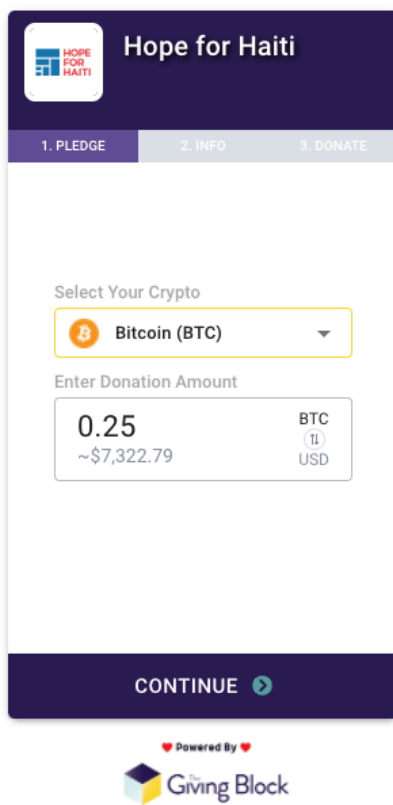
A hope to create new markets and opportunities

Danielle Saint-Lot, president of DSL Haiti Women's Foundation, recognizes the importance of technology for women. "I decided to start the Smart Fam movement — women using their smartphones for empowerment," said Saint-Lot.

Saint-Lot and Ernesto Contreras Escalona, Dash’s business development head, said the yam collaborative project is still in the proposal stage. At the crypto webinar, Contreras Escalona said “People want financial freedom and that is what we are here for.”

In an interview, Ryan Taylor, former CEO of Dash Core Group and a financial advisor to [Dash Investment Foundation](#), said there are different ways to market cryptocurrency. “If you market it as an investment, it may lead to higher highs for people looking to make money off of cryptocurrency. That’s not sustainable,” Taylor said.

But if you market it to the general public who can use it on a daily basis for the service it offers, then, “the price of Dash could never go to zero,” said Taylor, “ because there’s always someone looking to use it for a purpose.”



This widget on Hope for Haiti’s giving page offers over 100 cryptocurrencies to choose from for making a donation. Graphic courtesy of Hope for Haiti

Hope for Haiti, one of the largest nonprofits operating in Haiti, has received close to \$250,000 in crypto donations, according to Skyler Badenoch, CEO of the Florida-based organization. Almost \$120,000 of crypto donations came through the gaming community.

Hope for Haiti's [Giving Block](#) widget on its site lists more than 100 cryptocurrencies that can be exchanged immediately into U.S. dollars that the organization then uses toward its programs.

Last February, the nonprofit received a crypto-based [gift of \\$150,000](#) that supported 300 or so families affected by the August 2021 earthquake. Badenoch said participants received digital cash transfers to use with selected vendors to purchase food, healthcare and other items.

Once Hope for Haiti decided cryptocurrency would be part of their approach, Badenoch hoped to raise a million dollars. "It's just one of our goals," he said. "We aspire to be one of the most forward-thinking creative organizations that's trying to solve important challenges in Haiti."

Hope for Haiti will be utilizing a new technology, adapted from cryptocurrency – the recently popular [non-fungible token art](#) — to raise money, according to Badenoch. Hope for Haiti, "will procure the art of six Haitian artists," said Badenoch in an interview, "and partner with a company called [Snowcrash](#) to produce 900 [NFTs](#), or 150 for each artist." The plan is to have the artwork ready June 27th for [NFTNYC](#), touted as the superbowl of NFTs.

"Our hope is that we'll be able to raise money not only for our organization, but to support the artists," said Badenoch. Resale of digital art provides income for artists unavailable through conventional art transactions.

Government looks to educate

During the Embassy-sponsored webinar, Rose-Lourdes Elysée of the [Haiti Ministry of Economy and Finance](#) reflected on the financial potential that women throughout Haiti offer. Elysée, the coordinator for the Central Unit for Management of Public Private Partnerships, said her unit is focused on providing financial literacy, both formal and informal, to women to improve their financial situation.

"On the street, they are using digital means to transfer money and there is really a lot of hope that we can use this infrastructure," Elysée said during her presentation at the embassy's crypto webinar. "We look at how the Haitian population has progressed with technology to date and we believe that women in Haiti will move into crypto as fast as other technologies."

Elysée did not provide examples of which specific technologies she referenced.

Look for the next installment about the pros and cons of bringing cryptocurrencies to Haitians.

