



Côte Sud Initiative: Integrated Development in Haiti Epilogue

With Finance Minister André Lemercier Georges and Agriculture Minister Hebert Docteur out of office in early May, there was very little time to obtain their replacements' signatures for allocating funds to the Port-à-Piment Watershed Project component of the broader Côte Sud Initiative (CSI). When Marie Carmelle Jean-Marie was appointed the new minister of finance, Millennium Development Goals advisor and CSI co-science coordinator Tatiana Wah wrote to her—but things moved slowly. "She was so busy figuring out her new job [yet] she took time to answer," says Wah. "She said that she would look into it."¹ Getting a signature from the new minister of agriculture was also a challenge. "I knew that I needed a request letter from the new agriculture minister within less than a two-week time frame," Wah recalls.

In the end, it was impossible. When the team missed the internal project deadline of June to secure funding—which CSI had hoped would come from the Inter-American Development Bank—"I knew it was done," says Wah.

That particular deadline was important because we had to give at least two weeks' notice to our people who were being let go if we didn't get the money. I couldn't hold folks with no payment. I had to let them know.

On July 24, 2012, Wah, Fischer and UNEP representatives held meetings in the Port-a-Piment mayor's office and the Millennium Village Project office to tell the community that the project had run out of funding and was shutting down. The community was devastated. In tearful and angry responses, community members reminded the team that it had promised to complete at least five years as the start of an ambitious, 20-year development program says Project Manager Alex Fischer. He found it hard to take the blame. He recalls:

It fell on our shoulders even though it wasn't our fault or choice that the donors had cut the funding. That was probably the hardest part of this,

¹ Author's interview with Tatiana Wah, September 10, 2013, in New York, NY. All further quotes from Wah, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

delivering that news to the community. I felt like I had a commitment to that community. I certainly left feeling betrayed by the donors.²

Several positions, including the critical ones of science coordinator and community coordinator, remained unfilled at the end of the project. The team from the Earth Institute held the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) responsible. "We were running with a limp from the beginning," says Fischer. It was a disappointment, adds Levy.

We kept the thing on life support for a really, really long time. Finally we just had to pull the plug. We tried really hard to keep as many of the staff on the payroll as possible, but a lot of the really good work was just completely dismantled.

The team had collected baseline data, but the initiative's premature end meant there would be no significant implementation based on those findings, nor would there be a repeat data collection, and therefore no way to track changes over time. Also, the project's next year had included a series of community workshops and local school discussions to present the data to the community. "We were trying to demonstrate why information is so valuable," says Fischer. "One of my big regrets is that we didn't have enough time to do that."

We had planned to give talks in all of the schools with the students and with the parents. We had had plans to do community evenings where we talk a little bit about the study results and then show movies. We had all of these plans for different types of engagement with the community applying the results of the study.

Broken system. The initiative's failure drove home for the Earth Institute team how fragile Haiti really was, and how disconnected the international aid community seemed to be from the government and people of Haiti. The high rate of turnover in the Haitian government and the consequent failure of the donor community to take Haitian government officials seriously resulted in a self-perpetuating broken system.

To compensate for a weak government partner, donor organizations created parallel bureaucracies, referred to as technical assistance units or executing units, within Haitian ministries. In many cases, these units were the de facto civil servants, says Wah. The frequent government shakeups often left these donor-dependent bureaucrats making decisions for their ministries. "What [the donors] don't understand is, continuing the way they're working will always make the state fragile," says Wah.

² Author's interview with Alex Fischer, September 10, 2013 in New York, NY. All further quotes from Fischer, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Against this backdrop, the Côte Sud Initiative's failure left her sorrowful. She remembers:

I spent months going to sleep crying. I just thought, I don't see a future for Haiti. It's a broken, broken, broken country, and the support system is nowhere to be found.

Ironically, some of the initiative's first concrete results had just begun to benefit the community when the project ended. In spring 2012, for example, CSI had graduated a class of 100 community health workers. For the first time, everyone in the watershed had access to healthcare. Before the program, people had to travel miles to get healthcare. "It was easily one of the most desperate needs that they had," says Levy.

We would be up in the field and see people carrying people on homemade stretchers—little pieces of cloth strung between two sticks—basically walking 10 miles or so barefoot on big hills to get people to the nearest clinic.

This modest success vividly illustrated the depth of the community's poverty and the need for multi-sector development. It was a sad footnote when one of the new healthcare workers had to cross the Port-a-Piment River to collect her first paycheck. There was no bridge. As she tried to wade across, she was swept away and drowned.

As of February 2014, Wah and Fischer continued to serve as director and associate director respectively of the Haiti Research and Policy Program at the Earth Institute's Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development. Wah also continued to serve as a development advisor to the Haitian government. Levy, Wah and Fischer continued to advocate data-driven policymaking in Haiti in support of the Haitian government's Office of E-Governance and multiple ministries. They continued to argue for multi-sector investment in the Port-à-Piment watershed.