



# “If change should come, we should bring it”

Stories of Citizen-led Development in Haiti

A joint publication of  
Le Centre Haïtien du Leadership et de l'Excellence  
and Coady International Institute



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## Partners

**Le Centre Haïtien du Leadership et de l'Excellence** (CHLE, Haitian Centre for Leadership and Excellence), was established in 2011 to build new, broad-based, civic-minded leadership in Haiti's private, government, and community development sectors. The Centre offers leadership education programs for women, youth, civic activists, government officials, and business leaders. The Centre also conducts research into local innovations in citizen-driven initiatives. These innovations are used in targeted public awareness campaigns to promote collaborative leadership at all levels of Haitian society.

**The Coady International Institute** is a world leader in community-based, citizen-led development education. Based on the campus of St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada, the Coady Institute offers a wide range of educational programs dedicated to advancing community self-reliance, global security, social justice, and democratic participation. Thousands of Coady graduates are working in 130 countries to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequity, and help local citizens create self-reliant communities.

# Foreword

— The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean

27th Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada, UNESCO Special Envoy for Haiti

This foreword is an excerpt from Michaëlle Jean's address, "Transformative leadership for social uplift: New leaders for the new Haiti," delivered on October 10, 2012 at the World Trade and Convention Centre in Halifax, Canada.

I am just back from a recent mission in Haiti. Let me tell you this: the need for citizen-based leadership, for the emergence of a new, powerful wellspring of human energy devoted to social uplift, to the common good, and to the advancement of a whole people has never been greater than at this time in Haiti.

The specific approach that constitutes the fundamental DNA of Le Centre Haïtien du Leadership et de l'Excellence (CHLE), its dual objective of building collective responsibility and civic leadership, couldn't be more needed or more timely. Let me tell you an anecdote from our latest mission. It might shed some light on some of the issues facing Haiti right now.

As you remember, Haiti suffered unbelievable destruction in the earthquake in January 2010. Most government buildings collapsed under the deadly tremors. During my stay in Haiti, President Martelly invited me to tour some of the numerous construction sites in Port-au-Prince. You have to know this: fantastic work has been accomplished over the last two years. From the initial 1,600,000 people rendered homeless by the disaster, only 300,000 remain to be relocated. We can now celebrate the dismantlement of about 90% of the relief camps.

As I set out with the President to one of those neighbourhoods where social housing is being built, word gets out. Unsurprisingly, hundreds gather. Most come to ask for work. A ton of young men come begging, "President! President! Give me a job!" Each puts his hand up for himself, "President, what are you going to do for me?" For me, for me. It's always "for me"!

So as I stand beside the President, I'm wondering how he's going to deal with the situation. He talks to the crowd trying to explain the project: "Yes, there will be jobs. Yes, development plans are underway to bring new workshops, new plants, to this neighbourhood."

Still, the young men press on, "Give me a job! President, I need a job!" So President Martelly turns to the contractor and says, "Are you going to hire more people? Do you still need people?" The contractor says, "Yes, we'll need about a hundred more. I especially need masons and carpenters. We'll need to hire."

There's this man who's *that* close to the President. He keeps yelling louder and louder. So the President says, "OK, you!" And the excited unemployed worker jumps up and down shouting, "Oh! Wow! Yes, me! I got a job!"

But the President stops him and says, "No. No. Wait a second. I was just told by the contractor here that some recruitment is needed before people can be hired. So before you get a job, I am giving you a responsibility. What's your line of work?"

The worker says, "I'm a mason." The President says, "That's a good thing because we are looking for masons. The foreman tells me he needs 25 masons. Now your responsibility is this: before we hire you as a mason, you will go out and find 24 other masons. Masonry is your trade, no? So you know other masons, right?"

But the man keeps jumping up and down. He roars, "Yeah! I've got a job! I've got a job!" Again, the President stops him and says, "No, you don't understand. You don't have a job. You have a responsibility. Your responsibility is to go out and recruit 24 other masons. Counting you, that's 25. Mr. foreman here is ready to hire 25 masons." "Oh Mister President, thank you for doing this for me!" The President says, "No, my friend, you still don't understand."

The President went over this at least five times. He had to tell the man again and again: above all else, you have a responsibility. You have to find 24 other masons. "This is not only about you. We are not here to help you all individually."

I found this exchange highly symbolic of the current reality in Haiti. “What are you doing for me?” has become the obsessive question on everyone’s lips. “What will you give me?” “Give me something. Something for me. Me. Me. Me.”

Rampant individualism has taken over the dismantled state. Someone else will do it for me. *You* do it for me. This is the mentality we are dealing with. This is the attitude any new leadership for Haiti will have to tackle and transform. Because leadership is the total opposite of every man for himself and for his clan. Leadership is about group initiative. Leadership is about becoming the agents of our lives. Leadership is responsibility. Leadership is accountability. Leadership is thinking for the collective. What good is leadership, if it isn’t closely entwined with the notion of collective betterment and with the goal of ensuring the well-being of the whole community? Leadership, to me, is inseparable from the notion of the common good.

There are many types of leadership. My preferred type of leadership, and the CHLE’s type of leadership, is not the type that is primarily self-serving. Nor is it the “saviour” type, the “strong man” type, the autocratic style. God knows, we’ve seen the destructive power of certain types of dictatorial leadership. Not all leadership is created equal. To me, leadership is about the empowerment of marginalized communities for the common good.

Across all the commitments I make and keep, I am moved by one desire, by the vital quest to create tangible opportunities for new voices to speak out, for new leadership to emerge. Through all endeavours, transformative leadership is the thread that binds it all together for me. I believe the CHLE’s citizen-led approach is the most promising solution for sustainable, long-lasting change in Haiti. The Centre’s six-pronged program—targeting youth leaders, civil society leaders, business leaders, national government leaders, and women leaders—holds the key to pulling Haiti out of dependency.

The Centre is designed as a space of possibility and inclusion, of excellence without elitism. I see the Centre as opening the way for many to come in. My concern has always been that it be fully accessible outside of elite circles. Haiti’s circle of leadership needs to be significantly expanded. The CHLE has the potential to become a hub for the best practices: a centre for innovation in leadership, focused on the concept of the public good. The key to its success will be the integration of youth, ensuring that programming is decentralized and that sustainable partnerships are established with existing Haitian institutions and from the Haitian perspective.

By empowering grassroots citizen leaders, the CHLE is giving people a voice to help fight against inequality, reduce poverty, and promote social justice in their communities. The CHLE recognizes, as I do, the strength and potential of women, youth, and indigenous peoples to influence change.

And you know what is the most beautiful thing when marginalized people come into their own power and start to take their rightful place in the world? They shine a new light on everything. They... You... We start to add new dimensions to everything, including the meaning of what it is to be a leader. Leadership itself is transformed. It becomes different. It becomes shared. It becomes collective. It becomes more aware. And we all grow fuller with the richness of expanded human possibilities.

Like life itself, our successes have a funny way of replicating themselves. I am amazed to see how a living success—such as this new broad-based, civic-minded, leadership culture—can be replicated, each time with added twists and new adaptations. Each iteration adds its own bit of code to its underlying genetics. Each generation a bit more nimble, a bit more powerful. We have seen it: miracles are replicable. When it’s been done before, it can usually be done again. And as the wonderful light of empowered leadership starts shining on all of us, on all of humanity, we’ll see the ark of history grow ever farther, and reach even deeper.

# Introduction

— **Maryse Pénette-Kedar**

President of SOLANO, Haitian subsidiary of Royal Caribbean, President of PRODEV Haiti, CHLE Co-Chair

— **Magalie Noel Dresse**

Owner of Caribbean Crafts, Director of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, CHLE Co-Chair

— **Claire Cecile Pierre**

Director, Program in Health Systems Strengthening & Social Change, Harvard Medical School, CHLE Founding Co-Chair

*Change doesn't come from others. It's we who live here. If change should come, we should bring it.*

— Stephen Italien, founding member of Soley Leve, Cité Soleil

Broad and vague statements such as “Haiti is poor,” “Haiti is corrupt,” “Haiti is unequal,” or “Haiti is uneducated” are not new nor shocking. Heard across the globe, these characterizations present an unbalanced view of Haiti and do nothing to recognize the Haitian men and women who work tirelessly against obstacles to create better lives for their families and communities.

As global and local media presented story after story of Haiti’s woes, we realized that an opportunity to highlight Haiti’s strengths was being missed. In response, we came together in 2011 to find solutions to the oft-perceived leadership vacuum in Haiti that overshadows its grassroots leaders. We felt that these leaders needed to be sought out and supported as exemplary Haitian role models who could in turn catalyze the emergence of future leaders. We established Le Centre Haïtien du Leadership et de l’Excellence (CHLE, the Haitian Centre for Leadership and Excellence), representing a wide array of stakeholders—the private sector, national and international NGOs, political parties, universities, grassroots groups, and Haitian government agencies. While our career paths vary greatly, we are working together under the CHLE banner to answer this burning question: What can we do to highlight and invest in responsible leadership that will help build a sound democracy and a prosperous, inclusive, and self-reliant economy in Haiti?

Not a small task, but we have been blessed with many supporters from within and outside Haiti. The Coady International Institute, for example, a leadership education and research institution based at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada, has been supporting the Centre’s work from the very outset. The Coady’s work is founded on decades of practical research and

participation in citizen-led development and collective action. We went to the Coady to see what this was all about. We visited communities and leaders who have stimulated citizens to drive their own development. We discovered tools and processes to identify and build on the abundance of resources that exist in Haiti—the resources we had not used or even recognized before.

This profoundly changed the way we looked at things at home. What we learned at the Coady was not a model to be transplanted in Haiti, but a new way of recognizing and building on our domestic resources and our home-grown examples of success. This approach has been instrumental in formulating the CHLE’s mission: to move beyond the perception of Haiti as a dependent and “failed state”; to uncover and celebrate the countless success stories that are often unnoticed or undervalued; and to use these stories as the basis for our curriculum, which is aimed at building a new cadre of citizen leaders in Haiti.

Haitians have become well versed in needs-based rhetoric due to the influence of the problem-focused development industry that has so strongly pervaded our lives. So when we got home from the Coady, it was a bit unfamiliar for us to focus on our resources, skills, and talents rather than dwelling on limitations or weaknesses. Our starting point was now different than it had been in the past. Instead of asking “What do we need?” we started asking ourselves, “What do we have?” Instead of asking “What historical events have held us back?” we started asking ourselves, “What do we have in Haiti that is truly ours, that can serve as the foundation for building national pride?” Our shared opinion was: “The 1804 revolution—the founding of Haiti as the first black

republic in the world.” While this event is of course a very legitimate source of national honour, it dates back over two centuries. An awkward silence ensued as we realized that while there are many historical examples of Haitian perseverance and leadership, in the public eye these models have been overshadowed by a national discourse pervaded by negativity.

This further solidified our resolve. To build better leadership, we would need to bring forth inspiring examples provided by citizens like those featured in these case studies, whose stories challenge other people to take action. The CHLE needed to help overturn the negative way in which the outside world and, more importantly, we, Haitians, often saw ourselves. Its principles and mission were conceived in these initial discussions, and we have been working diligently since then to establish an institution that encourages and celebrates civic-minded and visionary leadership through education, research, and public awareness programs.

Our first step was to collect stories of people who are already taking action to build a better society, to see what we could learn from them. And we found that there was no shortage of such stories once we started looking. We have been greatly inspired by the tenacity and wisdom of Haitian farmers, teachers, small business owners, and community activists featured in this publication. Recognizing their work made investing our time and efforts into the CHLE feel like a gift.

In Lamontagne, we met a group of young men who returned from the city to their rural home community to build a life that would inspire other young people to stay there. Youth out-migration from this community has, indeed, decreased as a result of their efforts. The story unfolding in Palto traces one woman’s journey to becoming an entrepreneur and shows how economic empowerment can lead to the creation of other types of power for women over time. In Cité Soleil, we encountered a group of resourceful young men and women who revived the tradition of mutual assistance and cooperative work (*konbit*). Together they have rebranded their neighbourhoods through art, music, community gardening, and street-cleaning. We met dedicated local government officials in San Yago, who offered a glimpse of what can be achieved through collaboration between authorities and citizens. Finally, in Bailly, we met with a local association that has created a more dispersed leadership structure to enable more transparent and decentralized decision-making.

The five cases that make up this collection present but a small fraction of the many examples of citizen-led development that can be found in Haiti, and we hope that they will inspire the readers to recognize and celebrate the leaders in their own communities. This publication is of great significance because it demonstrates to the world that Haiti does have the people, the tools, the resources, and the community spirit to engage in change that starts from within.



The first graduates of the CHLE’s leadership program (2011)



## Lamontagne: Bringing young people home to stay

*This initiative subscribes to the same ideals that we have advocated for at Fondation Etre Ayisyen for over three years. Indeed, we realized very quickly that there was a need to promote entrepreneur-leaders capable of taking charge of and transforming their communities and above all else able to defy this fatalist sentiment that seeks to convince young Haitians that they are condemned by their social and geographic origins.*

*The changes realized by the young people of Lamontagne are a positive sign for all who dare to dream of a better tomorrow and of a new Haiti. This story provides an opportunity to remember how critical it is to cultivate strategies of success that have the power to inspire an entire generation.*

*The entrepreneurial spirit that motivates these young men and women must be highlighted and celebrated. This capacity to create must be valued and disseminated across the broadest audience, with the objective of eradicating this mentality of dependence and charity that has characterized us for too long.*

*We hope that this experience will be successful, allowing the young people to discover themselves, take initiative, and explore the unlimited opportunities that surround them. Let this initiative prove how entrepreneurship can be used as an effective tool to combat poverty.*

— Mathias Pierre

President, GaMa Group and Fondation ETRE Ayisyen

Lamontagne is an area with a population of approximately 25,000 people located in the South-East Department, about 60 km southwest of Port-au-Prince and 20 km west of the picturesque city of Jacmel. Agriculture has always been the main source of livelihood in this area. However, as is the case throughout Haiti, employment in small-scale agriculture has not been an occupation of choice ever since structural adjustment programs introduced in the 1990s weakened this sector. Those programs cut the tariffs that had protected domestic agricultural producers and led to an influx of cheaper foreign food. Political instability around the 1991 *coup d'état* also drove many agricultural investors and exporters out of the country. As a result, thousands of farm workers poured into the capital, often ending up in shantytowns, unable to find formal work and having to eke out a living from selling water sachets or driving motorcycle taxis.

There were also social pressures leading to increased urbanization as it became commonplace for parents to sacrifice the small gains they made with agriculture to send their children to school in urban areas, hoping they would eventually find off-farm employment and start sending money home. Today, it is typical of rural Haitian families to show pride in their children who have settled

in Port-au-Prince, and a sense of disappointment when a grown son or daughter is still living on the homestead.

The state's limited capacity to deliver services also reinforces this perception. The vast majority of state services in Haiti are only available in its capital and a few other cities scattered across the country. Electricity, roads, water, hospitals, and schools are among the services that get progressively harder to find as one gets farther away from the city. As a result of all these factors, over the past 20 years Haiti has gone from one of the lowest to one of the highest rural-to-urban migra-



View of Jacmel

tion rates in Latin America. Today, roughly a third of the country's nine million citizens reside in Port-au-Prince.

It was in this context that twelve young men, who had left Lamontagne to obtain higher education and employment, decided to come back in 2004. They had grown tired of city life far from their families, and where fresh food and decent jobs were hard to find. The young men promised each other that if in two years they did not succeed in creating good employment opportunities for Lamontagne's youth, they would return to the city knowing they had given it their best shot.

They were not welcomed with open arms. Their parents were unhappy that the young men had seemingly taken their sacrifices for granted, and many residents of Lamontagne were suspicious: "Who did we think we were? Young people coming from the city, thinking we knew how to do things better." The twelve young men were no longer welcome in their homes and had to share a small dwelling until they could convince others of their intentions.

The founders of this initiative called it *Oganizasyon Jenès Aktif Pou Devlopman Lamontagne* (Organization of Active Youth for the Development of Lamontagne). This name did not help their cause as it excluded the adult members of the community. They quickly changed the name to *Oganizasyon Peyizan Aktif Pou Devlopman Lamontagne* (OPADEL, Organization of Active Peasants for the Development of Lamontagne), indicating that membership would be open to the entire community. However, the name change did not have an immediate effect on membership growth.

The young men were worried. They realized that they had to produce some quick, concrete results. They turned to agriculture since most of the local residents farmed for their own consumption. The founders of OPADEL saw the potential in moving beyond subsistence agriculture—namely, substituting some imported food products with locally grown ones. Yet, having been educated in the city, they had very little idea of how to put this idea into practice. They pooled their resources and sent five members of their team to a training on cultivating non-traditional crops offered by the Ministry of Agriculture. In return for the sponsorship, these individuals promised to share their new skills by committing to two years of voluntary service upon return.

Upon the group's return from the training, the young men acquired a plot of land in an area that was visible to most residents and split it into two sections, planting one with traditional maize and the other with peppers, a high-value cash crop. Nearby farmers soon became aware that the section with the peppers was generating more lucrative gains than the maize. The residents of Lamontagne started to take note of what these young people were doing.

Building on this experience, OPADEL members began experimenting with grafting oranges, tangerines, and mangoes, which sold at more than three times the price of traditional crops. In a good year, local farmers could produce enough of these new crops to double their previous average annual earnings of US\$125 per farm—not an insignificant feat. OPADEL members also established a tree nursery. Using the traditional practice of *konbit*, they reforested the hillsides with palm trees. And people started to join in. Reflecting on how they were able to convince others to participate, OPADEL founders explained, "People don't listen with their ears. They listen with their eyes!"

Today, OPADEL has over one thousand members. This impressive growth is no doubt a result of the economic benefits the organization has helped bring to Lamontagne, but it also owes much to its strategy of forming semi-autonomous associations in which practically every community member can find a place: *Peyia-OPA* for farmers provides training, seeds, and plants; *Fanm-OPA* for women provides micro-lending for business activities; *IJ-OPA* for young people runs computer literacy



Reforested hillside in Lamontagne

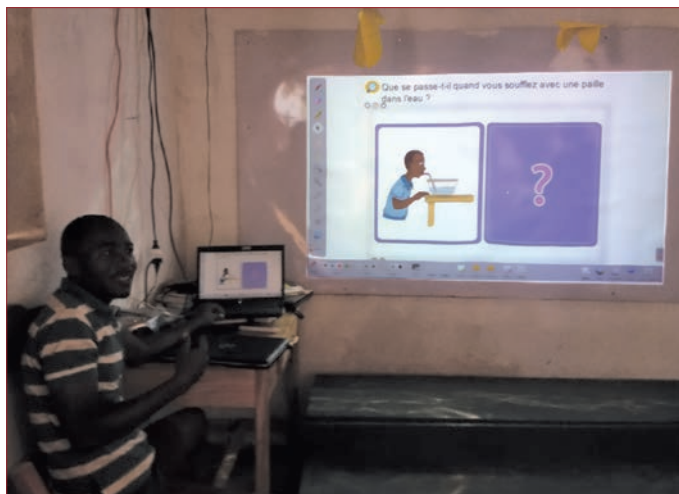
courses; and *Ti-OPA* for children engages in gardening, using the profits from selling their produce to pay for the upkeep of the local school. Thanks to this strategy, OPADEL has been able to dismantle the perception that it was intended only to serve the interests of the young and formally educated people.

Each of these associations has made its contribution to diminishing the factors motivating Lamontagne residents to move to the city. For instance, one of the greatest forces pushing young people out of Lamontagne was a lack of educational opportunities. There weren't enough kindergartens or primary schools in the community, so the children of Lamontagne were forced to walk up and down the mountain every day to access educational facilities in a nearby town. Eventually one of OPADEL founders gave up his house so that it could be used as a pre-school, moving back in with his parents until a new school was constructed. During the busiest period of its existence, this temporary school enrolled over 50 students.

OPADEL's next initiative was to replace the dated school curriculum with lessons in Creole that resonated with young people. It has also established a partnership with *Haiti Futur*, a non-profit organization supported largely by the Haitian diaspora, which now provides regular trainings for schoolteachers from Lamontagne in the use of multimedia technologies in science and art education. This initiative has demonstrated that Lamontagne children can be educated to a standard equal to (or even above) that accessible to their urban peers, without leaving their home community.

Another factor that pulled young residents of rural areas such as Lamontagne to the cities was the promise of decent housing. Many youth of Lamontagne felt embarrassed about their wattle and daub houses when they brought their friends home. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, OPADEL sent one of its members to be trained in house construction. When he returned—committing to stay and share his newly acquired skills for two years, as in the case of OPADEL's first initiative—the organization launched a gabion building workshop in partnership with *Planète Urgence* (a French NGO). This project provides on-the-job training in earthquake-resistant construction for young women and men of Lamontagne. The gabion houses they have learned to build are sturdier and more attractive than wattle and daub structures. Except for the roof, they are made entirely of local materials. Today this workshop employs over 60 people, who are now in high demand for all ongoing and upcoming construction jobs in the community, including the new primary school. Recently OPADEL members have constructed a youth centre to host cultural events and film screenings so that there is now a space for leisure activities in Lamontagne.

A mere decade ago, Lamontagne was a typical rural community, suffering from a decline in the agricultural sector and a severe "brain drain" of its young people. The founders of OPADEL and their increasingly enthusiastic following have shown that if quality education, employment, and housing are available, the depopulation of such areas as this can be reversed.



Use of multimedia technologies in Lamontagne primary school



House building using rock-filled gabion cages in Lamontagne

## Palto: Creating a “revolution” for rural women in Saut d’Eau

*This story is about the incredible resilience of Haitian women and their capacity to step up and create collective leadership. It is a journey of thousands of women’s organizations from rural under-served communities throughout the country. With limited resources, they are advocating for gender equality and social and economic justice. They create economic opportunities and invest in their children’s education. They fail, and then move forward with better plans and advance further. These women are our strength. They are the backbone of our economy, of our country. Many of them are illiterate but very knowledgeable of the needs and priorities of their community.*

*Agents of change, the women in this story created their own revolution and are paving the way for other Haitian women to do the same. They should have their voices heard in churches, in the business sector, in local government, in parliament, at all levels of national life as set out in our Constitution. This story is about shaping a collective future in a country where there are just and equal opportunities for all.*

— Danielle Saint-Lôt

Ambassador-at-Large for Investment in Women’s Empowerment,  
Cofounder and Special Adviser of Femmes en Démocratie,  
Haiti’s Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism in 2004-05

*Kodinasyon Fanm Rivye Kano* (KOFAR, Women’s Coordination of the Kano River) is an organization based in the neighbourhood of Palto in the communal section of Saut d’Eau, a dusty mountainous area with a population of 34,000 people in the Central Plateau Department. Most local residents work on small family farms growing fruit or raising livestock to sell in nearby markets.

This organization is a vision realized by Modeline Athine Gracia, a soft-spoken woman whose understated presence conceals her impressive organizing ability and the renowned position she has come to hold as a community leader. Modeline’s motivation to start the organization came from the lack of opportunities for women to participate fully in community life. “We represent 52% of the population,” she explains. “We don’t have to sit. We can do other things besides domestic chores. Let’s value our 52%.”

Recognizing Modeline’s leadership potential, a local peasant association selected her to participate in an organizational leadership development program held in Saut d’Eau in 2002. According to Modeline, this training built her confidence and taught her practical community organizing strategies, which enabled her to undertake a three-year campaign together with 15 other women. They went door-to-door speaking to local women about the necessity of uniting to achieve better

economic and leadership opportunities. The campaign culminated in a general assembly of women of Saut d’Eau in 2005, during which they decided to establish a formal organization. The assembly identified accountability, transparency, and personal financial investment as the norms expected of all members. These three conditions have been the key factors of KOFAR’s sustainability over the past seven years.

With their pooled savings, KOFAR members started producing confitures and cream liqueurs from the fruit that arrived in local markets overripe or crushed. The second member-funded project was a community garden to grow more fruit for this burgeoning business.



KOFAR members processing mangoes

Bolstered by the success of these ventures and intent on doing something more ambitious, KOFAR started approaching potential external investors. One of its earliest partners was the Ministry of Agriculture, whose staff helped facilitate the preparation of KOFAR's first Community Development Plan. This document outlined the organization's vision and development priorities. It was also meant to ensure that prospective partners understand and concur with KOFAR's long-term strategy before engaging in its work.

All of KOFAR's projects are designed by its members and approved by their vote before outside help is sought. "We have no fixed partners," explains Modeline. "We put our heads together and then we approach an NGO. Even if they don't respond, we continue with the idea. We don't stop working because don't have funding."

To date, KOFAR has engaged a wide array of partners including government agencies, international NGOs, and local community associations. Partners have provided training on best agricultural practices and fruit processing, which has enabled the women of Palto to find seasonal work in the local agricultural sector and supplement their incomes. As a result, they are now able to save more than they did in the past, pay school fees more easily, and have even created a special fund to support KOFAR's members during emergencies.



Freshly made KOFAR products



Modeline Athine Gracia tending to KOFAR's fruit tree nursery

Not all of KOFAR's initiatives have been successful, but its members have not given up in the face of challenges. For example, in 2005, the local women ran into some difficulties when they tried to establish their own chicken hatchery, which was a relatively large project compared to those they had undertaken in the past. KOFAR contributed 20% (nearly US\$ 2,000) to this project, and the Ministry of Agriculture provided the rest. Unfortunately, the chickens did not survive. Yet this failed initiative did not stop KOFAR's members, and they have continued to undertake equally ambitious projects. These include a \$20,000 food processing facility and cultural centre that is now used for baptisms, weddings, and other community festivities, which often serve as fundraisers for KOFAR's projects.

Economic gains from these initiatives have increased women's influence in Palto, and KOFAR has begun to expand its activities to other areas such as family planning, women's and infant health and nutrition, environmental protection, and advocacy for women's rights. It is also important to note that KOFAR's growing credibility has made it possible for the local women to talk openly with men about their commitment to promoting gender equality in all spheres of life.

These changes over the last decade have resulted in what KOFAR's members call a "revolution" in their neighbourhood. Women now take leadership roles alongside their husbands, while men actively participate in KOFAR's activities. In this new inclusive space the women of Palto feel united, supported, and capable of taking further actions to continue improving their households and broader community.

## San Yago: Forging ties between citizens and government

*A viable and effective decentralized Haitian government has been a vague concept since the idea was first introduced as a priority in the 1987 Haitian constitution. Limited investment and technical capacity as well as a concentration of decision-making power and resources in Port-au-Prince have hindered the capacity of local government officials to respond to their constituencies even when the political will is there, which often it is not. Foreign assistance has often filled the gap left by government officials, unintentionally taken the onus off local officials to provide services, and perpetuated dysfunctional relationships between citizens and government officials.*

*San Yago may be an exception to this situation. While it is still in its early days, and the results have been fairly modest to date, what you read about in this story is qualitatively different from what we experienced in our own communities growing up and what we see today. Organized and vibrant community leaders act in union with dedicated local government officials, who participate in and respond to the priorities expressed by their constituencies.*

*This case describes a mutually beneficial partnership model for Haiti, and a starting point for discussing the spaces (or lack thereof) for citizens and local government to participate in the decision-making processes at higher levels as well as how existing mechanisms for decentralization of resources and power can be meaningfully executed. San Yago should be a community we follow in the future for they seem to be on a different track than many other communities in Haiti.*

— Kesner Pharel

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Group Croissance,  
Economic and financial affairs radio commentator

San Yago is a rural agricultural community of 36,000 people in the North Department. The area has relatively fertile soil as a result of the expansion of an irrigation canal, a project initiated by community members at the turn of the century. The irrigation canal is only one of the many things that were created by San Yago men and women. When asked to describe the proudest moments in their history, residents explained that the school, church, and restored roads could all be taken as evidence of their ability to organize and pool resources.



Irrigation system built by San Yago citizens

San Yago citizens continue to be active today, but in a more formally structured way than they acted in the past. A local association called *Inyon Gwoupmant Paysan pour le Développement de San Yago* (IGPDS, Union of Peasants for the Development of San Yago) has emerged as an umbrella organization to coordinate various community activities related to agriculture, health, and income generation.

Notwithstanding the broad range of past and ongoing activities undertaken by community groups in San Yago, access to services continues to be a serious issue for this community. There is no electricity or running water in San Yago, and its residents have largely been left to their own devices to meet their basic needs. While there are mechanisms for citizens to have an input into the decisions made at various levels of government regarding service delivery, when San Yago residents were asked to describe these mechanisms, no one could clearly articulate what they consist of beyond their interactions with the lowest level of government—namely, *Konsèy Administrasyon Seksyon Kominal* (CASEC, Administrative Councils of the Communal Sections) and *Administrasyon Seksyon Kominal* (ASEC, Administration of Communal Sections).

San Yago stands out because of the strong relationships this community has developed with the local CASEC and ASEC, which directly support its activities and advocate on behalf of its interests before municipal government. Representatives of these government units live in San Yago, whereas in other areas local government officials usually reside outside communities of this type. A staff member of the local ASEC indicated the importance of being present in the community: “If something happens, we see it first. Community members bring their concerns to us; we address them together.”

Local government officials also emphasize the importance of being accountable first and foremost to their constituency rather than to their political parties, which does not commonly occur in other parts of the country. A local government worker explained:

In other places, CASEC officials may think that they represent power. And this prevents them from uniting with their community and makes them unite with political parties instead. It’s not like that here. This is why we succeed.

Indeed, the officials based in San Yago consult. They advise. While they hold positions of power, they also participate in community activities alongside other citizens as ordinary members of the community.

Collaborative relationships between citizens and their elected representatives are not commonly found in other parts of Haiti and the clear evidence of their existence in San Yago has attracted the attention of NGOs that are eager to work in a place where they have a fairly good chance of achieving results. One NGO staff observed:

In other areas, NGOs may not have problems with local government, but there is a certain indifference. I am here. You are there. I don’t bother you. You don’t bother me. Everyone minds their own business. But here is a synergy and collaboration, which, for us, indicates a good potential for success.



Community meeting in San Yago

The local CASEC and ASEC officials admit that their relationships within the San Yago community are solid; but to date, its citizens have had very little interaction with, or support from, municipal authorities, which significantly limits the scope of the initiatives they are able to undertake. The good news is that current government policies provide some openings for support. According to one official,

In the government’s plans, agriculture is one of the key sectors that should advance, which is positive [for San Yago]. The authorities are talking about facilitating farmers’ access to micro-loans, which is very important. They are also talking about improving the tourism industry, and this implies that more roads are going to be built. So indirectly, the farmers could benefit if they will more easily transport their products to local markets.

San Yago is a community filled with active and organized citizens. These citizens have access to supportive local government officials, and there are policies in place that could allow them to build on their already successful initiatives. What remains to be seen is whether there are government agencies beyond the immediate community that have the will and resources to support the community’s own development priorities.

# Cité Soleil: Youth changing the face of their neighbourhoods

*A key principle in development is the notion of sustainability, where success is measured by the durability of the intended change. In 2003, a group of young men and women from Cité Soleil founded Soley Leve, a collective movement to transform not only their physical environment but also to catalyze a mentality shift in Cité Soleil that would instill pride and hope in their neighbourhoods.*

*Differentiating themselves from traditional service-providing NGOs that had not promoted community unity in the past, they chose a flexible, non-hierarchical organizational structure through which its members could decide where their efforts would be most valuable. Members creatively drew inspiration from the historically rural tradition of konbit—the pooling of community resources to reach their goals, which has allowed Soley Leve members to bring their ideas to scale.*

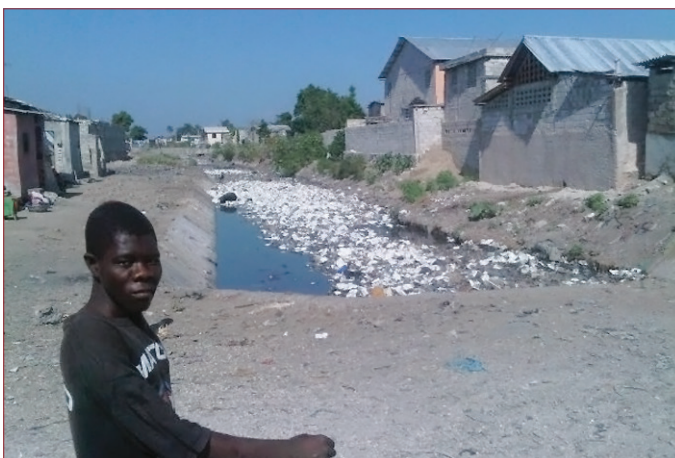
*A decade later, Soley Leve is vibrant and has expanded to many other neighbourhoods of Cité Soleil, continuing to have positive, reverberating effects in the region as a whole. Remaining relatively informal and fluid, and drawing on konbit in urban areas are two factors contributing to the movement's success and sustainability.*

— Nancy Dorsinville

Policy Adviser for the Office of the United Nations' Special Envoy to Haiti

Cité Soleil is a settlement of roughly 400,000 people in Port-au-Prince. Some of its residents are employed in nearby factories, but most work informally as merchants, artisans, electricians, welders, fishermen, and carpenters. Despite its bright name, Cité Soleil is often referred to as “the most dangerous place on earth,” “the most notorious slum in the Western Hemisphere,” or “a microcosm of all the ills in Haitian society.” There is a heavy UN peacekeeping presence in Cité Soleil owing to the prevalence of gangs, violence, and instability.

Since Cité Soleil is located at a lower elevation than the rest of Port-au-Prince, garbage flows from the wealthier neighbourhoods into its canals and backyards



Garbage-filled canal in Cité Soleil

whenever it rains. On a particularly rainy day in 2004, a young man named Stephen Italien had had enough. His neighbourhood was one of the most flood-prone areas, experiencing the most severe garbage accumulation. Stephen had just invited his friends to Cité Soleil to visit, and was ashamed of its garbage-ridden landscape. Going door-to-door, Stephen rallied his neighbours. Together they hollowed out old television sets and transformed them into garbage bins. Eventually they managed to clear all the garbage from the city block where they lived. They re-baptized their neighbourhood into *La Difference*.

While this cleaning rally may have seemed like a small feat, it did inspire others to take action. Another group emerged to clean a second city block and then a third and a fourth. One woman reflected on the power of simply seeing that change was possible and within the grasp of ordinary people:

Street cleaning was a small and achievable task that started with what we had. What you really want people to feel is not “How can I *ever* do this?” but “How can I *not* do this?”

This wave of spontaneous action challenged people to think about the things they could do for themselves and highlighted the positive attributes of their neighbourhoods. It was then that a group of 20 young men and



women from six different neighbourhoods of Cité Soleil decided to seek out a safe and politically neutral meeting place where they could discuss how to keep the momentum going.

This group articulated a new vision for Cité Soleil. They called their initiative *Soley Leve* (Rising Sun): Just as the sun rises in every part of the world, so too are there people everywhere doing things for themselves. The group took to the streets and communicated their message using megaphones, music, and flyers, as well as spreading it online through Facebook and blogs. And people started to rally behind them.

The founders of *Soley Leve* revived the spirit of *konbit*, a traditional work-sharing practice that is usually found in Haiti's rural agricultural communities. The young men and women used *konbit* to clean more streets, plant flowers, install street lights, paint boats, and organize festivals. As one woman explained, "Social movements don't need a lot of money, they just need a visible result." This result was a fresh and positive rebranding of those parts of Cité Soleil where the young activists lived.

Through working together, a new type of shared leadership has emerged in an area characterized by deep divisions. Indeed, the very idea of becoming a so-called "leader" had come to be regarded with fear among the residents of Cité Soleil over the past decades, and the term had grown into something like a "curse" word. Past leaders in Cité Soleil tended to be opportunistic,

emerging when they could derive personal benefits (usually financial) from putting themselves in charge and then moving out of the neighbourhood once the money had dried up. Also, Cité Soleil has long been a highly politicized area with a number of street gangs having their own alliances. It was therefore dangerous for active citizens to draw too much attention to themselves for fear of being targeted by gang members.

When asked to reflect on how the new shared leadership and solidarity emerged in Cité Soleil, members of *Soley Leve* indicated three factors. One of these was reliance on "sweat equity," which to them meant that the process of doing something for yourself and with others transforms relationships. A member explained:

It doesn't matter how small or big the task is—cleaning the streets or painting a boat—if I'm sweating next to you and we share a sachet of water, that's human. People have to tough it out together.

Second, focusing on people's strengths and on what they could contribute to revitalizing the neighbourhood helped break down preexisting divisions and bolstered their willingness to participate—an opportunity to showcase their talents and skills made them feel good. Third, founding members of *Soley Leve* refused to establish a formal legal entity. *Soley Leve* does not have an office, board, directorship, program, or political affiliation. One founder offered the following opinion:

This makes it awkward, but we are united because of our philosophy and principles. People can take from it what they want. I'm sure some people still think we are about street cleaning ... and that's fine, but we are about the spirit of *konbit*.

Adherence to shared principles has helped the active citizens of Cité Soleil to engage with NGOs from a position of strength, which was not always the case in the past. Before the emergence of *Soley Leve*, relationships between the local citizens and NGOs were strained and the area became known as the "graveyard of good intentions" due to lack of consultation with the residents and introduction of projects that did not suit the local context. As a result of these experiences, the "baseline assumption about NGOs," as described by one member



Street murals created by the activists of *Soley Leve* convey positive images of their neighbourhoods

of *Soley Leve*, was “the expectation that something is going to go wrong.” However, there is now a willingness to work with outside partners among the residents, if this work is carried out in a spirit of mutual respect.

What kind of partnership are the activists of *Soley Leve* looking for? The founders have a few recommendations:

*Outsiders cannot want a project more than the community does. The minute they walk in with their log frame, we know they want it more than us. We stop trusting. This log frame is the way the donor sees it, not us.*

*Sometimes we move slowly, and sometimes we surge. We don't trust anything fast. It has never worked in the past.*

*It's not always about money. If we had started any of our activities with money, we wouldn't have gotten this far. We need someone to give us the last bit ...the roof, the paint ... not the first bit.*

*A lot of people benefit from the traditional needs assessment and it's not in their interest to change. We compare depending on this type of assistance to having a mental addiction. You know you don't want it, but you can't say no. We just want to engage differently. We are more than needs.*

The residents of Cité Soleil have largely been labeled on account of the challenges facing them. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the young men and women of Cité Soleil have come together to revive and celebrate the good aspects of their home area that have been overlooked or undervalued by outsiders and insiders alike. *Soley Leve* is a movement that begins by looking within, transcends party politics, and endeavours to redefine the way in which development is commonly perceived and undertaken. Whether or not NGOs and other actors prove capable of supporting the alternative ways in which grassroots groups such as *Soley Leve* are organizing, remains an open question.



A group of young street cleaners in Cité Soleil

## Bailly: Rebuilding community through collective action

*The development approaches of some NGOs and government agencies have often led to community members sitting and waiting for organizations to provide for them. Not so in Bailly. The men and women in this community have demonstrated that local leaders and organizations can take the lead in their own development and promote social change.*

*Current leaders drew inspiration from successful leaders from decades ago and mobilized people from different villages to build their own local organization, Bailly Peasant Union, integrating people from all socio-economic situations. Women, men, and youth now have a voice. They are working together to develop diverse kinds of livelihoods, and to improve agricultural production and family well-being. As a result of their efforts, Bailly is becoming an attraction for people from surrounding communities and even the nearby city of Baho.*

*It is critical to identify similar cases in other rural areas and facilitate interactions and networking among them in order to reinforce their confidence and build a stronger civil society. This would mark a new era in the quest for prosperous and self-sustaining rural development in Haiti.*

— Cantave Jean Baptiste

Founder and Executive Director of Partenariat pour le Développement Local

Bailly is a remote agricultural community of 9,000 people in the North Department. The first inhabitants were brought to this area by train to extract natural resources for export through the nearby port city of Cap-Haïtien. By the mid-1900s, the railway was abandoned, and many labourers stayed in the area, eking out a subsistence living. The closure of the railway left Bailly largely isolated from the outside world and motivated one farmer to gather his neighbours and set out to the nearest village of Pignon to convince its residents to construct a road connecting the two communities. Evoking the longstanding Afro-Caribbean tradition of *konbit*, Bailly elders recalled: “They started from their end; we started from ours, and by 1952 there was a road that connected us together.”

Bailly elders remember the arrival of the first car on their new road in 1971. This event marked the beginning of new relationships with people from outside the community. These relationships introduced important resources, but they also had unintended effects on the longstanding local traditions of self-reliance and reciprocity. Opportunistic groups emerged to secure money and food from NGOs and church-based organizations. Other people watched how this process worked and followed suit. A community that used to pride itself on protecting the interests of all its members became increasingly atomized, and the residents grew more and more preoccupied with looking after their own self-

serving interests. The traditional leaders of the time admitted that “they became intelligent in a not-so-good way”—as a result of which, the institution of traditional leadership began to lose credibility.

In 2005, a pastor named Edmond St. Vale, a native of Bailly who had left it as a young man to pursue a religious vocation, returned to the village to offer a faith-based workshop for the local youth. Shocked by the changes that had taken place, he called meetings with Bailly residents to discuss their impressions of how the community’s leadership had evolved. These discussions revealed that the residents were also dismayed at losing the sense of community, and together they decided to do something to bring it back. To that end, they formed



**Bailly women walk to the market along the road constructed by the community**

a local chapter of *Le Mouvement Paysan de Papaye* (Peasant Movement of Papaye)—a grassroots organization dating back to 1973, which brought together over 50,000 farmers residing in Haiti’s Central Plateau region to pool their resources for social, cultural, and economic development. Bailly residents named their chapter *Le Mouvement Paysan de Bailly* (MPB, Peasant Movement of Bailly).

After making sure that Bailly residents were genuinely trying to revive the spirit of community and self-help, Pastor St. Vale connected MPB with two like-minded organizations—first with *Voisins Mondiaux* (World Neighbours), and later with *Partenariat pour le Développement Local* (PDL, Partnership for Local Development), and they developed a joint action plan aimed to improve the overall quality of life in Bailly. A World Neighbours’ field worker, Jean-Claude Destine (who would later join PDL), started staying part of each month in Bailly to provide training and technical support necessary for the realization of the community’s action plan.

Some community members, traditional leaders in particular, were initially suspicious of Destine’s motives. In response, he initiated a few fairly easily achievable tasks (“quick wins,” as he called them) aimed to build trust with the residents. As an agronomist, he convinced some of the local farmers to grow new crops that he was confident would thrive: tomatoes and cabbage. The results were so impressive that the entire community, including traditional leaders, soon became keen on working with Destine on less tangible tasks such as building leadership and social cohesion.

PDL staff were concerned about the predominant form of community organization that was emerging across Haiti, with power concentrated in the hands of a few, and very few mechanisms in place to hold leaders to account. Present community-based organizations in Bailly were no exception. As a result, PDL opted not to work with any of these organizations. Instead, PDL staff asked Bailly residents to design a new organization with more decentralized leadership and straightforward mechanisms of democratic decision-making. The new organization, named *Inyon Gwoupman Peyizan Bay* (IGPB, the Bailly Peasant Union) by the residents, was a more inclusive version of MPB with an expanded agenda. Its members undertook a number of new tasks, such as health promotion, savings and credit, or seed



Bailly men clear fields using the tradition practice of *konbit*

bank development, and established special groups to champion the interests of women and youth. In terms of membership, IGPB has outgrown its predecessor: it boasts over 1,300 members and keeps expanding.

The basic “building blocks” of IGPB are small groups of like-minded individuals, called *gwoupman*, composed of 8-15 people. Currently there are 96 such groups within IGPB. Thirteen people are elected from the *gwoupman* to serve on the Block Committee and Central Coordinating Committee, which oversee different community activities such as those related to agriculture and health. In order to ensure that no one holds too much power, IGPB members have resolved that no individual can serve on both these committees simultaneously. Roles, responsibilities, and decision-making mechanisms are clearly laid out at each level and are well understood by the members. The new structure teaches democracy through practice.

This new way of organizing has brought a number of benefits to the community. IGPB members have achieved considerable success in controlling erosion and improving soil fertility in the area through concerted work that has involved constructing stone walls, planting trees, and preparing compost to control erosion. Another important achievement has consisted in



Member of Baily women's association explains their work

the establishment of a community-managed savings and credit association, which already includes 575 members, most of them women. The health group launched a broad campaign to raise awareness about the importance of hand-washing, using pit latrines, and drinking filtered water, which arguably helped the community to avoid cholera-related deaths during its recent outbreak

that took thousands of lives in other parts of the country. The young men and women of Baily have created their own group which holds weekly movie nights using a community generator purchased by IGPB. Members of the youth group also meet regularly to discuss the issues they consider important.

While the results of organizing have improved Baily in visible ways, it is the very *act of coming together* that appears to have had the most impact. Baily residents observe that they now feel more included in decision-making, which has become more transparent than it used to be in the past. They have more trust in each other and in the leadership, which is now dispersed throughout the community. Perhaps one of the clearest signs that change has taken place in Baily is that the word "leader" has regained its credibility and the residents now say it with pride. This story demonstrates how leadership and community cohesion can be lost with the introduction of new resources, but also how they can be intentionally restored.

# Questions for reflection and discussion

These case studies were produced to stimulate discussion among the participants in the CHLE leadership education programs. Following are some suggested questions to help facilitators probe participants to think more deeply about the case studies.

1. Is this an example of “community-driven” development? Why or why not?
2. What strategies did leaders use to bring people together to achieve a common goal?
3. Can you identify any important “turning points” in the story?
4. Who were the leaders? For each of these leaders, list:
  - The qualities of leadership they displayed
  - What motivated them to play a leadership role
5. What individual, group, and community assets did leaders draw upon?
6. What did leaders in this story do to encourage more people to participate over time?
7. What can be done to help people start these kinds of initiatives in other communities?
8. How could these local initiatives improve the lives of more community members (economically, politically, or socially)?
9. What opportunities or challenges do you see in sustaining these accomplishments and building on them while ensuring the process remains driven by the community?
10. Does this story have any implications for the way you work with community groups? If so, what are they?
11. If you wanted to invest in this initiative, what kind of investment do you think would be the most useful for the community?
12. From your own experience, can you think of an example of successful collaboration between community groups and outside supporters such as government agencies, NGOs, or private sector organizations? What were the factors that contributed to its success?





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