



Remote mountainous area of Arreguy, Haiti 2019, © María Cotarelo.

Potential of grounded interventions to change community dynamics: an NGO experience in Haiti

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Back in 2019 I visited the remote area of Arreguy in Haiti. I was there on a field mission to monitor the development of several projects implemented by the Haitian partner organisation of the Spanish internationally focused NGO I was working for at that moment.

A Welcoming Family in Arreguy

The main focus of the two NGOs was to promote the universal human right to quality education, thus enabling other rights: the right to work, to equality, to an adequate standard of living, to a dignified life. This is particularly crucial – as well as challenging – in a context of a de facto failed state, where institutions are fragile or lack the necessary resources to ensure social welfare, and around 90% of the educational institutions are non-public in the poorest country in the LAC region (World Bank: 2023).

1. The views expressed by the author in this article reflect only the author's ideas and do not represent the opinions or positions of any current or past entities the author has been affiliated to.

Arreguy, a rural, remote area with limited or no access to basic services, faces high levels of poverty and vulnerability. After Hurricane Matthew in 2016, we raised funding to reconstruct schools and housing as an enabling strategy to ensure access to quality education for all children as soon as possible after the natural disaster. Having a home brings a feeling of empowerment and worthiness to parents, allowing them to engage in economic activities and enrol their children in schools. Such initiatives were intended to increase children's chances to obtain a job and a dignified life in the future.

As part of our NGO's project monitoring activities, I was lucky enough to visit several communities supported by the intervention and engage in conversation with the families of school children. I specifically remember one of the constructed houses we were kindly invited to visit. It was humble. The exterior had been built according to regulations, which were in place to prevent hurricane and earthquake-caused damage. The interior only had a few pieces of handmade wood furniture. The family of four felt awkward for not being able to offer us a more comfortable visit and yet, they were as welcoming as can be. They explained how the house had changed their lives as they were homeless before. A house provided them with the opportunity to establish a place to manufacture and sell goods, allowing them to enrol their children in school. We shared the coconut water they offered and said our goodbyes and best wishes. They seemed hopeful, despite everything. Hope is something increasingly uncommon in Haiti.



One of the houses rebuilt after Hurricane Matthew with support of the project, Haiti 2019, © María Cotarelo.

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Life in Haiti today

Only four years have passed since that visit in 2019 but the situation has rapidly degraded, not only in Port-au-Prince and other big cities but also in rural and remote areas where conflict and violence had traditionally been more benevolent. Recent developments include a price increase in oil, which is crucial for day-to-day life since the public electricity grid cannot be trusted; protests; government’s failure to control violence; de-facto rule of violent gangs; thousands trying to flee the country; kidnappings, robberies, murders; and children missing school and their childhood (Al Jazeera: 2022; Douyon: 2023; Reuters: 2023; The Guardian: 2023; UNICEF: 2023). Haitians have been fighting for their homeland, sovereignty, and freedom for more than 500 years against foreign and domestic mismanagement, before and after independence, respectively. They still do, although it is getting harder due to the reigning violence and lawlessness.

My contacts in Haiti are afraid to go out on the streets, not even to do something “defiant” such as protesting or similar activities out of line with the gangs’ instructions, but just to try to buy some food for the day. Haitians who would have never thought of leaving the country are increasingly considering this as the only viable option to survive. We will have to wait to assess the impact that the recently approved UN Security Council international mission may have on the country – and its population (UN News: 2023). The mission should be accompanied by a strategy to ensure that stability will be maintained after its mandate ends to avoid mistakes of the past.

Need to Keep Working for Hope

Even though the current situation is close to a humanitarian crisis, the development work of NGOs continues to be essential provided they can stay active. Ideally, these organisations are neutral, their main goal is to empower communities and they usually have a global vision of the interrelated needs and issues in a particular area, thereby being able to address the actual challenges on an interconnected and multifaceted level. In the case of house reconstruction in Arreguy, not only housing was being provided. This initiative was accompanied by an integral intervention, including the reconstruction of schools, community empowerment and capacity building, training

for teachers, as well as hygiene training for disease prevention after the hurricane. And, of course, it also included an advocacy strategy to compel institutions and communities to prioritise children's right to quality education. These grounded interventions might seem to have little relevance in a macro perspective, but in reality, they have the potential of exponentially changing community dynamics and fostering positive behaviours and commitment of educational communities in order to build more peaceful, equal, and resilient societies. Education may be a slow tool, but it's a powerful one to transform the world.

I never got to see that family in Arreguy again, but I think of them occasionally, wishing they still nurture some of the hope they displayed that day. There must be hope somewhere.

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About the author

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