Sustainability at UT Austin extends beyond campus boundaries. In January 2011, seven UT graduate students travelled to the rural area Creve in northwestern Haiti as consultants for Mountain of Hope (MoH), a small non-profit organization from Texas whose members have worked in Haiti since 1998. The students’ aim was to assess two of MoH’s planned projects: the creation of a microfinance organization and the development of a community water supply system. The result was a feasibility study and report with recommendations to MoH. The field research was made possible by the Curtis W. Meadows, Jr. Social Enterprise Fellows program and part of a semester long course called “Sustainable Development in Haiti” led by Dr. David Eaton from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. The course was designed to allow students to take learning from the classroom to the field, where they could face real problems requiring long-term answers. The students made up an interdisciplinary mix, representing several departments within the UT community.

Microfinance Project

Communities in rural Haiti, such as Creve, face many challenges. Among these challenges are a lack of economic development and employment opportunities as well as limited schooling options after primary school for young people in Creve.

One proven method of assisting people out of poverty in developing countries is through microfinance institutions. These institutions work with individuals or groups and give them small loans or amounts of credit to be used to invest in a small business. The recipients also receive training and support to ensure success, and to come up with a viable and sustainable plan for their small business. In Creve, a group of local leaders created a
microfinance institution that would cater to the needs of their community.

The students’ three main goals for the time of field study were to:

1. Conduct a survey to gather data to verify the need for microloans and how people in the community would use the money if they qualified;
2. Gather data about the local organizational capacity and create recommendations on strengthening organizational management;
3. Train interested members of the community on the fundamentals of microfinance.

These findings would give MoH a better picture of the economic situation in Haiti and assist them in prioritizing future projects. If MoH felt that a Creve-based microfinance institution was viable and sustainable, then they could begin a comprehensive fundraising campaign to support the project. Prior to the field trip to Haiti, the student team researched best practices in microfinance and produced training content that was presented to the group of local leaders responsible for leading the microfinance project.

Once in Creve, the group conducted extensive interviews to gauge the community’s “entrepreneurial spirit” and to learn what type of ideas for small businesses already existed. In addition, the students visited with existing microfinance institutions in the area and compiled an extensive database of the types of jobs found in Creve, including income range and the prices of goods and services.

Through the course of the trip, students began to understand the practical challenges associated with launching a microfinance institution in Creve. Because there was no communication with the local leaders in Creve prior to arrival, the students had to adjust their training plans and recommendations throughout the trip. The students learned that the microfinance group already had a board, organization structure, saved funds, and a name.

This lack of communication culminated on the last day of the trip when it was revealed that the Creve microfinance institution had already been loaning money to people in the community. While the students repeatedly asked for all relevant documents throughout the trip, they finally received them during this last meeting.

This last-day revelation was a complete surprise and dramatically affected the perception of the project and students’ comfort level with recommending future funding. An intensive audit by the students revealed numerous problems, including bookkeeping errors, interest rate errors, incomplete forms, missing forms, two revolving loans for one person, disproportionately large loan amounts given to the same individuals and that 20 percent of the existing loans were in arrears.

In order to create the foundation for a sustainable and transparent microfinance organization in Creve, the students recommended MoH not raise funds for the group until they made significant improvements in managing their institution. Further, the students recommend MoH work closely with and support local leaders to help them gain more experience in outreach, bookkeeping, and capacity building.

**Water Project**

The availability of adequate clean water is also one of Haiti’s greatest
challenges. With regard to creating a community water supply system, the students had three main goals:

1. Survey the existing water resources and involved institutions within the community;
2. Evaluate the suitability of potential water access projects (including community consultation);
3. Propose possible water supply projects to be funded and implemented in Creve.

The end goal of this work was to propose a reliable and sustainable source of water for the community of Creve. Other relevant issues, such as water quality and levels of hygiene, were also explored to gain a full understanding of the challenges associated with water in Creve.

The findings of the study emphasize the dire need for better sources of water in Creve. There are four types of water sources available in and around the community: springs, wells, rainwater collection systems, and open streams. However, according to standardized household surveys, approximately 70 percent of the nearby population relies on just one location, a spring-fed cistern built in the 1980s. The quality of the water was generally acceptable (with the exception of bacteria in some locations), yet accessibility was not. The household survey conducted found that people fetching water, most of them children, spend at least one hour per day doing so for themselves, their families, and their animals. These insights make the placement of any future long-term water project a crucial consideration.

Water sector development in Haiti is primarily dealt with by national and international non-government organizations. The organizational framework around a water source, where it exists, is in most cases ad-hoc and diverse, generally led by a committee of community members. Therefore, any plans for a sustainable water source must take these committees into account, finding ways to keep them functional, motivated, and accountable to the community. In addition, the students found that the availability of information on water projects undertaken by NGOs is hugely important to assure accountability and maintenance of the water supply in the long-term.

Based on conclusions drawn from these observations and surveys, the team proposed several potential water projects for implementation by MoH. The students submitted a detailed report containing relevant findings and recommendations. Of the recommendations submitted, MoH decided to choose a project to create multiple community water wells, and will implement it by the end of the year. Students from future UT Austin trips to Haiti will be able to monitor the efficiency of this development, as well as its impact on the community in the long-term.

Findings and Conclusions

Overall, the team’s main challenge was lack of resources and information about Creve prior to their field research. During the fall semester, students working on the microfinance project prepared extensive materials on capacity building and other best practices, but had no way to share the information with the people in Creve until arrival. This led to the “surprise” at the end of the trip that finally revealed the microfinance organization in town had already dispersed loans. Regarding the water project, for instance, there was limited information on the topography of the region and the level of water hygiene and training needed to ad-
dress such issues. As a result, the group was forced to make several assumptions, such as the need to build a microfinance group in Creve from the ground up, that proved incorrect and time consuming.

Overall, however, the students’ experience working on the two projects proved invaluable as they gained applied research skills in a very challenging environment. Further, their findings revealed true potential for sustainable development in northwestern Haiti. In addition to their two focus areas, the students also identified additional areas for improvement in sustainable development in Creve, including healthcare services, infrastructure, and waste management.

The course “Sustainability in Haiti” and the partnership between MoH and the University of Texas at Austin are now entering into their third year. This collaboration represents a long-term commitment to supporting sustainable development in Creve and will continue to provide first-hand learning opportunities to UT Austin students.

Reference


2. For further information or to obtain a copy of the report please contact Dr. David Eaton at eaton@austin.utexas.edu

Additional information

Curtis W. Meadows, Jr. Social Enterprise Fellows program: Sustainable Development in Haiti Spring 2012

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