

Insight to Development Needs: Home Gardening and Photography

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Abstract

In order for international humanitarian and development organizations to integrate effective programs, the communities they seek to benefit must be informed, engaged and active in the process. Yet the targeted communities are rarely given an opportunity to contribute in shaping programs that meet their needs. This paper shares the experiences and lessons learned from a home gardening project that combined photography in which participants took photos for three-months. The purpose of the project was not only to enable women to grow food for their families but also empower them to show through photos the day-to-day challenges they face in Haiti; issues that organizations may take into account as they undertake humanitarian and development efforts. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere where 80% of its people live below the international poverty line of \$2 per day and 54% live in abject poverty surviving on just \$1.25 per day. Poverty levels are reflected in a very high infant mortality rate where 52 of every 1,000 children are dying before the age of one year (in the U.S. it is six per 1,000). This poverty is forcing at least 225,000 Haitian children to work as unpaid household servants, which is considered to be a modern-day form of slavery. Haiti is also the world's first black-lead republic. Located just 838 miles from Florida it is roughly the size of Maryland. With just over 10 million residents, it shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. The primary languages spoken are French and Creole. Its indigenous name, Ayiti, means "land of the high mountain." The home gardening project equipped 50 participants through training and education with the essential knowledge to establish and sustain their gardens for family consumption. Additionally, as the project evolved, participants took photos of their everyday lives using disposable cameras. The idea was to use pictures that

they took so they could tell their stories of the daily challenges they face. The photos from forty developed disposable cameras were used to create two photo albums, one from the researcher's point of view, the other from the participants' perspective. Key research lessons learned from this experience are: a) Research how you can wire the money to the country you will be employed, b) culture and traditions could alter the purpose of the research, c) be open to feedback, d) journal or make voice recordings to document experiences, e) get involved with different aspects of the organization, and f) build meaningful relationships with project staff and participants. Developing and implementing projects based on photography is a way to assess the needs of a community. This approach may allow non-governmental, faith-based, humanitarian, and governmental organizations to engage with target populations before proposing efforts to address such issues as poverty and food insecurity.

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How can international humanitarian and development organizations develop effective projects? Is the project producing the intended results? Are participants benefiting? These questions could be answered by engaging with the targeted population before proposing projects to pinpoint priorities from the perspective of participants. Yet, the targeted population is the least likely to have input into decisions that affect them whether it's social or economical issues. A way to proactively involve potential participants is through embedding photography in projects. This approach provides a platform for participants to voice their concerns and in turn, organizations are able to better assess the needs of the targeted population to develop meaningful projects. This paper shares the experiences and lessons learned from implementing a three-month home garden project in Haiti that combined photography.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere where 80% of its people live below the international poverty line of \$2 per day and 54% live in abject poverty surviving on just \$1.25 per day (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). Poverty levels are reflected in a very high infant mortality rate where 52 of every 1,000 children are dying before the age of one year (in the U.S. it is 6 per 1,000) (World Bank, 2015). This poverty is forcing at least 225,000 Haitian children to work as unpaid household servants, which is considered the modern-day form of slavery. Haiti is also the world's first black-led republic. Located just 838 miles from Florida it is roughly the size of Maryland. With just over 10 million residents it shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic (CIA, 2016). The languages spoken are French and Creole (CIA, 2016). Its indigenous name, Ayiti, means "land of the high mountain." These facts merely embody Haiti. Thus,

there is a need to understand the country's challenges from the perspective of Haitians who day-to-day encounter extreme poverty, hunger, and food insecurity. Capturing the Haitian perspective provides meaningful information and priorities considered important by the community for humanitarian and development organizations to develop successful projects.

Allured by curiosity to get hands-on experience, working at the community level in Haiti I developed a home garden project and executed project activities collaborating with Christianville Foundation. Christianville is a faith-based organization that provides humanitarian and agricultural programs to improve the livelihoods of the Haitian community. I met in person with the *Christianville* staff to plan and discuss the home garden idea. The organization agreed in supporting the home garden project for three-months by providing seeds, transportation, housing and an interpreter; however, I had to seek funds to pay for my travel expenses. As a result, I submitted the project idea to the Howard G. Buffet Foundation Chair on The Center on Conflict and Development (ConDev) at Texas A&M University and was successfully funded through their Student Media Grants Program (SMGP 2014). The SMGP is an annual photojournalism grant awarded to students interested in using innovative methods to research and chronicle issues facing fragile and conflict-affected nations. The home project had two goals: a) through home gardening improve access and availability of fruits and vegetables for families residing in Gressier, Haiti and b) through photojournalism chronicle issues faced by Haitian families to create public awareness of the critical issues humanitarian organizations face to combat hunger, food insecurity and poverty in Haiti.

As I packed my luggage, updated my vaccines, and purchased project materials, I felt nervous and anxious because I was flying to an unfamiliar country. While at the airport I noticed most of the people traveling to Haiti belong to various missionary organizations (most wore shirts with the missionaries logo). People would often ask me if I was on a mission trip. Later I learned from conversing with one of the missionaries, that mission organizations gather groups of 10-20 people to volunteer to work in impoverished communities by helping in building churches and orphanages. Once the flight landed at the capital (Port-au-prince), I waited half an hour for my luggage until I realized it was lost. The staff from Christianville arrived and they helped me file a claim. I felt relief because now I was in my new home. The one-hour drive to the Christianville campus was hectic, the blazing hot sun and the congested traffic made the drive seem longer. I learned this drive could sometimes take up to four hours due to heavy traffic, protestors or farmers' market day. During the drive, I saw a crowded market and next to it was a landfill in which a dark cloud emerged and covered the streets with a pungent burnt plastic smell. Also, I observed families living in torn tents, United Nations officials guarding the streets, beggars with amputated limbs from the earthquake, buses painted with giant portraits of famous soccer players, and unfinished concrete buildings.

Unpacking my carry-on luggage (my other luggage arrived later), it sunk in: I was on my own and unable to speak Creole; I had to adapt into my new environment. Settling into my new home: a private room with a bed, running water, electricity (diesel generator), Internet, three-meals a day, and transportation; a luxury in Haiti. Meeting with the Christianville staff, I discovered nearly all spoke Spanish. As a Spanish speaker, I felt

relieved. I wanted to get to know my colleagues instead of drowning them in the project details. As we shared stories, discussed our favorite music and movies, and laughed about how I naively asked questions about Haiti's culture; the unfamiliar suddenly felt like home.

After a few weeks in Haiti, I developed good relationships with the staff. They would pitch in ideas on ways to culturally adapt the project I had in mind. For example, they suggested to consider the types of fruits and vegetables consumed in households, how to recruit the participants, and learn the produce grown locally, among other important information to keep in mind as the project progressed. I asked one of the staff members, Stessy Auguste, if she could come with me to visit families residing nearby Christianville to begin recruiting. Stessy is an alumna from Zamorano University in Honduras and a native from Cap-Haitien, Haiti, and she manages a food processing plant at *Christianville*. She volunteered to help me interpret throughout the project. As we strolled in the streets of a rocky terrain towards tilled farmed plots to recruit, we saw two women hoeing while children were digging with their index fingers a hole to sow beans and corn on the perfectly shaped rows of soil. When we approached the women, they were startled by my presence, but as Stessy began to tell them about me and why I was there and inviting them to join a home garden project, their faces gleamed and brightly responded, "Oui." Because I did not speak Creole, Stessy was essential in supporting me promote the project among the communities. As I walked and met with potential participants, I asked myself, how Haitians perceive foreigners? From the perspective of a Haitian, I was a 'blanc,' a word used to describe tourists with light skin. By simply walking around the communities, I was beginning to understand what Haitians thought of

me: An American with a generous pocket. Stessy commented that the large influx of American and European non-profit organizations after the 2010 earthquake has perpetuated Haitians dependence on foreign help to survive. The Haitian government plays an important role in providing Haitian families with economic opportunities. However, non-profit organizations are in the frontline helping Haitian families through education, health and nutrition projects to fight hunger.

In the first month, I felt concerned because I had ten participants enrolled in the project and I thought I would never reach my goal of recruiting 30 women. Then, Stessy started to receive a few phone calls from interested women and men asking if we had more spots available because their relative or neighbor wanted to join. After recruiting 50 participants (40 women and 10 men), I decided to organize an information session about the project. With the help of Stessy, we prepared posters with photos and drawings to demonstrate the scope of the project to the participants, who were between the ages of 20 to 65 years old. We held the meeting at Christianville in an air-conditioned room with chairs and tables. I was amazed by the promptness of the participants to attend the meeting, and a few arrived one-hour before the meeting walking long distances from their homes. During the meeting, I showed the participants photos of other home garden projects in which I worked in Nicaragua and Guatemala. The idea was for them to visualize what their gardens could look like later. Although the project focused on empowering women, I decided to include the ten men that attended the meeting in the project. At the end of the meeting, I asked if I could visit the homes of the participants to survey the garden area. The participants readily responded, “Yes” and I quickly wrote on

a piece of paper their preferred days and times to visit their homes. At this point, I felt I was on the right track and this event gave me the confidence I needed.

Meanwhile, however, I had to start planting the seeds Christianville donated for the project. Conversing with Stessy and Dlouz Onesias, an agronomist, they advised me to sow eggplants, okra, pumpkin, and tomatoes, which are commonly consumed in households. Dlouz is an alumnus from Zamorano University in Honduras, a native from Cap-Haitien, Haiti, and is the agronomist supervisor at Christianville. Dlouz guided me on how to prepare the soil for the seedlings. First, we sterilized the soil using steam; the seedling mix was one part soil and two parts of burnt rice hulls used for the soil to retain water. With the help of four greenhouse workers, we filled 25 seedling trays (each tray has 2,000 seedlings). We carefully placed the tiny seeds one-by-one in the soil mix, a tedious task that took two days. I watered the plants daily, in a week the seeds were beginning to sprout.

However, I ran into a few problems. The leaves of the plants were turning yellow and dropped leaving the stem bare. I asked Dlouz for advice. He had battled with the problem before and recommended to apply a fungicide. Oscar Rivera, an agricultural project manager at World Relief, native to Nicaragua, with three years of experience working in Haiti, advised me to prepare an organic fertilizer from moringa leaves and sugar, which provides a boost of energy for the plants to recover faster. The moringa tree (*Moringa oleifera*), known as the “miracle tree” due to its high nutrients and protein content, has multi-purposes in Haiti. I was a bit skeptical but followed Oscar’s recommendations. He told me, “One week, the results will be visible.” The moringa tree

performed a miracle; the plants were greener and growing rapidly. I thought this was such a great tip to share with the participants that I invited Oscar to give a training session about utilizing moringa as an inexpensive fertilizer.

In the second month, I scheduled home visits that took place over a six- day period. During the visits, Stessy and Jean Michel, a driver at Christianville, came along to help me find the homes of the participants. Stepping inside the homes of the participants, I was warmly greeted with a “Bonjou cherie!” I observed the humble homes of the families constructed of plywood or plastic, a small fireplace with charcoal burning on the ground was their kitchen, and no electricity. After a few visits, water became a prominent concern for the project. While a few participants were close to a creek, others had to walk at least a mile to get water from wells. While visiting the homes, I often saw people hoard any undamaged plastic containers to store water to drink and cook. By the end of a long week, I was able to meet with all the participants. As I read over my field notes, my to-do list was getting longer: purchase watering cans, check on the plants, schedule a training on how to prepare the soil, deliver plants and disposable cameras, etc. Most of the participants inquired if I was going to provide containers for them to water their garden. I made a trip to the capital and asked for an estimate for each watering can, when I heard, “U.S \$18,” I thought they were absurdly expensive. Regardless, I had promised the participants I would buy them. But, I had failed to include this necessary item in the budget. I carefully revised my budget, I had set aside \$U.S 300 to buy food for the training sessions, I decided to use these funds to purchase 16 watering cans (U.S \$288). Inexperienced in raising funds, I stepped out of my comfort zone and asked for help. Unsure of what to do, I asked Oscar if he knew where I could get a better price for the

watering cans, he told me, “World Relief can sell you the watering cans at \$U.S 15.” I quickly composed an email to professors and friends to collect \$U.S 510. Dubious of my funding efforts, in two weeks I gathered enough money to purchase the watering cans, now I had to resolve how to get the funds to Haiti. I was wishing I could just drive to an ATM. Getting money in Haiti can take time and the bank fees could really add up. I asked Danette Philpot, assistant director of Christianville, “How do missionaries send money to Haiti?” Danette advised me to wire the money to her account and she could bring the money to Haiti. At that time, Danette was making a trip to the States; in three weeks I had the money to purchase the 34 watering cans.

Three communities participated in the project: Nandigo, La Reserve, and La Colline. I created an Excel sheet with the names and phone numbers of the participants, but I struggled to keep up with 50 participants (unable to understand Creole made it worse). In my previous experience working in Nicaragua on a home garden project, the project director had selected group leaders to help gather the participants for meetings instead of calling each participant. Thus, Stessy helped me select three leaders from each community. Through the home visits we were able to observe which participants were enthusiastic, attentive, and hardworking. After selecting the three group leaders, Stessy asked if they were willing to be leaders for their group in which they would be responsible for gathering the participants and supervising their gardens. The three leaders, Delina Chavannes, Jesula Joseph, and Marie Rose Paul, agreed to support the home garden project. Stessy contacted the leaders to schedule a workshop on preparing the soil and to confirm the date and time. Inevitably, due to the heavy rain, I had to cancel the workshop as the flooded roads made it unsafe to drive. After a week the rain stopped and

Stessy rescheduled a 15-minute workshop on preparing the soil at the homes of each group leader. We took hoes, shovels, measuring tape, and a good straw hat to tolerate the 100 degree F degree weather. Stessy explained to the women how to prepare the soil, how to build the raised beds, and fence the garden utilizing tree branches or plastic to keep animals from eating the plants. In two weeks, I asked Stessy to coordinate a follow-up visit to take note of which participants prepared their soil to deliver the plants. The follow-up visits took three days, accompanied by the group leader of each community. At the first two communities we visited, the participants blissfully showed us their hard work. In particular, Nandigo, roughly three miles from Christianville, where the group leader, Delina shared her land with four neighbors because they lacked land. Delina told me, “Vini, gade mewn jaden bèl” which translate: Come see my beautiful garden. Admiring their garden, I asked one participant if she did all the work herself, she bluntly replied, “My husband did the work.” When I visited the last community, I was upset because I saw plots of land unprepared. Stessy assertively told the participants if they neglected to prepare the soil they would not receive the plants. While some women nodded in agreement to prepare their soil, I observed other participants indifferent about what Stessy told them and boldly stated they were no longer interested in the garden.

In the third month, pressured by time to complete the project, I still had a few things on my to-do list: deliver plants, disposable cameras, and watering cans. Stessy confirmed a date and time with the group leaders for another follow-up visit. With a truck full of seedlings we started our first round of home visits in Nandigo. Delina gathered the participants at her home and helped me distribute the plants and watering cans as I checked off the names of the participants that received them. Then, Stessy gave

instructions on the planting distance, while I gave each participant a twig measuring 25 inches long for them to use as a guide when transplanting. During this time, each participant was also given a disposable camera. Stessy trained the participants on how to use the camera from turning on the flash at night or on cloudy days to the distance needed to take a photo. I gave the participants a camera for them to experiment. I saw a young woman squinting her eyes as she looked through the viewfinder window of the camera, excited she said, “Mwen gade moun,” which translates: I see people and she took a photo. For some using the camera was more difficult because they had never seen one before. Also, I had a few participants reluctant to take a camera and in sour-tone told me not to take photos of them, only their garden. I respected their decision and I reassured them there was no obligation to take photos. We repeated the same routine with the other two communities until we finished in the afternoon, exhausted.

In two weeks I was departing to Texas, longing to stay another month in Haiti to observe the participants harvest their hard work. Stessy helped me organize the last home visits to take photos of the gardens and collect the disposable cameras. In the morning, we visited La Colline and La Reserve, a few participants complained their goats ate their plants; others abandoned their garden because it was too much work for them. From previous experiences, I was aware participants were going to drop out of the project. Upset and disappointed, we drove to Nandigo. Delina was at her home, with a smile from cheek to cheek greeted us with hugs; we followed her as she told Stessy their garden was bèl. Delina’s garden was shared among her three neighbors and indeed the garden was blooming and some pumpkins were beginning to set fruit. With my broken Creole, I happily told her, “Mwen renmen anpil,” translates to: I really like your garden. At the end

of the visits, I was able to collect 40 cameras while the other 10 cameras were damaged or lost by the participants. I was pleased with the gardens of Nandigo community and asked Stessy if we could have a get together with the participants, she replied, “Yes, they will really like it.” Stessy commented to Delina and she agreed to cook for the fifteen participants. I gave Delina enough money to buy the ingredients to cook rice, fried chicken, macaroni salad, and Christianville donated tilapia. The day before leaving to Texas, we had dinner with the Nandigo community; I invited everyone that helped me throughout the project. We sat on dirt floors eating the delicious food; we chatted with the participants and danced to Kompa music (traditional music of Haiti). At the end, I had crafted photo albums for the Nandigo participants to keep; I printed the photos from my personal camera. The participants were happy to see the photos I would take of them during my visits. They sang a cheer for me and told me, “Bon voyage.” I practiced speaking Creole daily, which was worthwhile because I was able to thank the participants in their native language. That night I packed my clothes, souvenirs, the 40 disposable cameras, project materials, and was filled with emotion and excitement to share my experiences with family and friends.

During the following four months, I maintained contact with Stessy via Facebook to hear from her and if the participants continued caring for their gardens. Stessy told me that most of the participants abandoned their garden except for the Nandigo community. Reflecting on the project, I came across experiences I couldn't understand, thus I began asking a lot of whys to Christianville staff members with whom I built close relationships.

I asked Jean Michel, a driver at Christianville and participant of the garden project, I contacted Jean via Facebook and asked him the following:

- What were your first thoughts of the project? Jean replied: “For Haitians when they hear a project from an American, we think is going to help us make money. Its not me that thinks this, everyone thought they were going to make money. But I heard you explained the project, I think you are going to supervise us, help us prepare the soil, show farmers how to start the garden. I was part of a project about sanitation and hygiene from the University of Florida in which I worked in the project and got paid.”
- What do you think people thought of the cameras? Jean replied: “All the people do not want the images because they know that it is not only a project with no money, but after you take pictures they think you will make money.”
- What did the other people think of the project? Jean replied: “They think you come back with another project, they think your project is a pilot of another project.”
- What didn't you like about the project? “You left too soon, we still needed help taking care of the plants.” The matching puzzle pieces were falling into place, Stessy's and Jean's feedback allowed me to understand problems I encountered during the project's implementation phase.

The advice I would pass on to novice students venturing into working on agricultural projects abroad in developing nations, similar to conditions in Haiti are:

- After you receive your funds, research how you can wire the money to the country you will be employed.
- If you are conducting research, be careful because culture and traditions may sometimes make you change certain aspects of your research.

- Be open to advice on how to improve your project. For example, I wasted a lot of time browsing the Internet for curricula instead of asking the agronomists first.
- Carve out time to write daily in your journal or record your voice to document your experiences.
- Get involved with different aspects of the organization; ask your colleagues if you can tag along. This way, you are able to experience and observe how the community responds to their help, to their projects, and their staff.
- Lastly, getting the job done is what we often hear from our bosses, but this term doesn't translate, as we would like in other countries such as Haiti. Everything takes time and is more worthwhile to build good relationships with your colleagues than overwhelming yourself with completing the project.

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