

Haiti, Hurricanes, and Water

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As professionals working in the water sector, we care about water issues and areas facing water scarcity. But sometimes putting a face to the problem makes the need more pronounced and the motivation to seek change clearer.

Jacob Michel, an economist with a specialty in statistics, is in North Carolina for three weeks for a program sponsored by [International House](#). Michel is from Haiti and has seen first-hand the needs there as it is his life-long home. “I was born, grew up, and still live in Carrefour – 20 minutes away from downtown Port au Prince.”

Michel says that on a regular basis, residents of Haiti are in need of fresh water, electricity, and food. “Most people are living without electricity, and many communities do not have fresh water. In addition some areas only have access to imported food and because of a weak economy, there are no jobs and no money for the food.” In addition, Michel describes how the country’s government has “failed at putting public schools in some communities so people have to pay to send their children to school.” Without the money to afford schooling, some families are unable to educate their children.

Water is a particular problem in Haiti. People have to pay for safe water. Michel says that he pays an average of \$2 for a 5-gallon jug of water. He says his family, which includes his wife, brother-in-law, and newborn baby, need 15 gallons per week just for drinking. “We have access to water that we use for cooking and cleaning. This water comes from the national distribution network and we pay around \$10 for it on a monthly basis. I am one of the few households and very fortunate ones that can have access to water on a regularly basis in Carrefour from that national network.”

Areas outside the city pay more for clean water because of the cost of transporting it. “They often pay five times as much as we pay in Port au Prince [\$10 for 5 gallons of water] because the water companies are based in the city,” explains Michel. “In some areas, people use contaminated water but buy Clorox to treat it. Others that are not educated drink the contaminated water from local sources like rivers and streams.” This lack of education combined with a lack of access to safe water increases the problem of water-borne disease in Haiti. “Cholera has been a big problem for the whole country ever since the earthquake [of 2010],” describes Michel. “Even after an ordinary rain, there is an increase in Cholera.”

A variety of [organizations](#) have [built wells](#) in Haiti over the years but Michel states that often the residents are asked to pay for the clean water these wells provide. “People [in Haiti] aren’t used to paying for water, so the local people fought against it,” Michel explains. “Instead they used other water sources that are not clean. But

when cholera came, they started to pay for the well-water.” Not everyone has the money to pay for the well water. These people often resort to using contaminated water sources.

On October 3, 2016, [Hurricane Matthew](#) plowed through Haiti. Areas hardest hit included Dame Marie, Jeremie and Cayes. Michel was in Port au Prince during the hurricane and says that though the city saw rain, wind, and some flooding it was the southwest area of the island country that was devastated. “We had family there that we didn’t hear from for three days,” Michel describes. “When we were finally able to speak with them, they said they were fine physically but their houses were all wiped away. It’s been so sad to see pictures of the area and all the homes without roofs.” Michel reports that his family is in a camp along with most of the other residents of that part of the island hoping to receive assistance.

Accounts from areas such as [Dame Marie](#) say that resources are not reaching these remote, hard-hit areas. Michel says the government is a part of the delay. “After the earthquake [of 2010], millions of dollars were donated through thousands of NGO’s (Non-Governmental Organization) but nothing is changed six years later,” explains Michel. “The government doesn’t want that to happen again. They want the NGO’s to work through them, but the NGO’s don’t want to. In the meantime, people in need are not getting life-saving supplies.”

Michel hopes that by working with organizations like [Johnson C. Smith University](#), International House, and [SAROS](#) he can help find answers to Haiti’s water scarcity issues. “I can see the problems in my country, specifically in the water sector,” he explains. “I can see what strategies are not working. Something else needs to be built and I want to work on a project that can contribute to that solution.” Michel is in North Carolina working on a business plan and gathering materials to build a reverse-osmosis machine that will bring electricity and water to Haitian areas in need.

Haiti is a perfect example of an area facing long-running as well as disaster-caused water issues. As innovators and organizations look to collaborate with Haitians on water solutions, taking these insider perspectives into consideration can be helpful in creating successful outcomes.

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