

Haiti, not Tahiti

Internship report by Elisabeth Howard

Haiti, not Tahiti; and no it's not in Europe but yes, they do speak French.

My first struggle for the internship was getting my friends and family to understand "where" I was going – then came the "Who? What? When? Why?!"



So where? Haiti: the western part of the island Hispanola in the Caribbean. Being the first 'black republic' Haitians won their freedom from slavery almost 200 years ago, but have struggled to effectively implement long term democracy ever since. Political instability partnered with natural disasters, unequal trade agreements and disease have culminated to stunt Haiti's growth since their birth as a nation.

Who? Plan Haiti, an international non government organisation (INGO) working towards development and empowerment through the promotion of child rights and the enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The organisation was started 75 years ago, and has been working consistently in Haiti for almost 40 years, long before the earthquake or cholera of 2010 which made Haiti an 'NGO republic'.

What? Child Protection. Plan do not generally engage in-house, human rights lawyers, so my role was niche. It involved training in child protection and then the completion of a long and complicated child protection risk assessment tool. That is, I was charged with an internal audit of all of Plan Haiti's departments to ensure they met international child protection standards. Being based in the Country Office in Port-au-Prince, I visited each of the 3 program units in the South, East and the North-East at least once to interview staff and see programs being implemented. Often confronting, always colourful and punctuated with roads beyond bumpy, it was a fantastic way to see the grass roots work this INGO is involved in. Meeting with community members, parents and children who had been touched by Plan's involvement in their region was a definite

highlight and encouragement. While the stories of abuse children told were troubling, there were definite signs of improvement in education, sanitation and the quality of life which made the work inherently rewarding.

When? Three months over summer 2011 – 2012. During the internship Haiti commemorated the two year anniversary of their devastating earthquake, so it was a fascinating time to be there. I was able to be a part of the re-evaluation INGOs and the government were conducting in order to assess what a tremendous amount of work had already been done and plan long term measures for the future.

Living in a house with other ex-pats, it was really encouraging to hear of the progress Haiti has made in the last two years. However, it did become disappointingly clear just how misinformed the rest of the world appeared to be in relation to the full, complex situation. Haiti hasn't has a stable government for a very long time. Of the government it did have, around a third of the civil servants were killed in the earthquake. The reasons for the poverty and uneven wealth distribution have developed over a long period of time and, to a certain extent, are ingrained. A lot of media seemed to be asking why Haiti hadn't progressed more since the earthquake and why the billions of dollars thrown at the government and NGOs haven't resulted in a tropical paradise. The answer is that in Haiti's case, lack of money is not the problem. It's far more complex than that – there is a lack of infrastructure, employment, industry – in short, a very limited base for sustainable growth.

According to the reflections of my colleagues, Haiti has come a long way. Undeniably, it was experiencing problems before the earthquake, many of which prevail. Yes, the government has a lot of work to do. But the fact that Plan has been in Haiti for almost 40 years indicates that sustainable change takes time and community engagement – not just money and relief workers. Those things help, but we cannot simply throw money at Haiti and demand change. From time to time I saw a building which had collapsed, but for most Haitians, daily life is continuing – hopefully for the better!

Why? My interest in human rights and the work of INGOs made this internship the perfect combination. Being charged with completing the risk assessment tool to ensure that every department within Plan was maintaining the highest possible standards of child protection was a rewarding challenge. I interviewed everyone from IT to Media, HR to Sponsorship, technical advisors, staff sample groups and all levels of management. With these results I filled out a 12 sheet Excel table and wrote a report documenting the investigation methods and recommending improvements for future practices.

Being able to complete this project was a hugely rewarding experience. I look forward to monitoring the progress of Haiti and keeping in touch with the work of Plan.