

Article on Open Space in Haïti

by Joanne Mantha

On January 12th 2010, Haïti experienced one of the most devastating earthquake disasters in history. More than 250 000 died and 1.5 million were left without homes, mostly in and around the densely populated cities of Port-au-Prince and Jacmel. Among them were 20 000 government workers. Haïti's capacity to pick up the pieces was greatly handicapped not only because of the intensity of the quake but because of the precariousness of its population even before the quake.

Before this catastrophe, Haïti was known for being one of the poorest countries on earth. Most of its economy was focused in Port-au-Prince which gorged with improvised ghettos spread out here and there throughout the city. This catastrophe baffled the minds and capacity of the international community even though they had long been part of the Haïtien community. With several millions of dollars in trust to help Haïtiens from people and governments throughout the world, after six months, the reconstruction work had barely started.

In March of 2010, I was invited to work with the Québec based International Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) called *Solidarité Union Coopération Outremer* (SUCO) posted in Jacmel Haïti, to conduct a participative needs diagnosis in the commune of Cayes Jacmel. This commune is situated 5 kilometers from the city of Jacmel and has approximately 41 000 people with more than 1 000 homes devastated by the quake. For a period of 5 weeks, starting end of June, I was to collect data in order to propose projects that met the Haïtien government priorities, the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) priorities and SUCO's mandate in the country.

It was my first trip in Haïti and, although I had done similar work in Jamaica in 1998, I was a bit anxious to see what I would find. As an Open Space (OS) practitioner (<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace>), I was questioning how this approach could serve this community in such an extreme context. Before leaving for Haïti, I inquired about the Haïtian culture and managed to make email contact with John Engle, founder of <http://www.haitipartners.org/> and member of the OS community in Haïti. I left for Haïti more or less prepared for what awaited me. Yet, in my heart, I felt that I had done what I could from afar and that, once there, things would unfold. When I arrived at the airport in Port-au-Prince, among all the chaos, I saw John Engle, whom I thought I would not have the opportunity of meeting in person, walk right by me (I had seen images of him on his website) with his wife and two children! My heart soared with encouragement, in appreciation of this wonderful omen.

I have since returned from this assignment and can say that the omen manifested itself. After several discussions with a good friend of mine who is a great supporter of Open Space, I decided to share with you my thoughts and feelings from this experience where, with the help of the OS community, I did my best to make it as beneficial as possible for the people of Cayes Jacmel and for SUCO. There are four main themes that summarize my experience in Haïti.

1. OS, becoming for me a quantum rather than a mechanistic approach(?) where the observer is never separate from the experience and where the result is not absolute but an outcome that emerges and evolves from possibilities of outcomes

In the past, as an Organizational Development (OD) facilitator, one of my goals was to be as objective and neutral as possible. Experience, especially this one, showed me otherwise. From the first day, I felt that my presence, let alone the introduction of Open Space, could limit their ownership of the process. I needed to make the process as accessible to them as possible. I decided to adapt myself to their worldview as much as I could and to adjust the OS process to the protocols and reality of Cayes Jacmel's community by gaining a better understanding of this worldview.

In addition to meeting OS practitioners in Jacmel, I met with representatives of several government departments, international NGOs posted in Jacmel and local organizations or associations. From this background information I was able to make the process closer to their reality with protocol letters of invitation and written in French and in Créole, with having food prepared by their community. Everything was done in both French and *Créole* and special attention was given to encourage full participation from those who could not read nor write. To allow them time to adapt to the approach, the process itself was designed in an iterative way to ensure that the activity would not be only a one time event.

To me OS works best in a continuous mode, giving successive approximate results toward a more beneficial self-organization. Because this was the first OS process for them, it was carried out in an iterative and cumulative way; which made the needs not only evolve from one forum to the next but, also, let new more profound ones emerge.

2. Feeling that I was part of a sacred web and that my major role was to create a space for interconnectedness

Throughout my assignment I kept as close as possible to the OS way of thinking which I can describe as: whatever happens is what is meant to happen, whoever shows up is who is meant to show up, things start and end when they need to.... My opportune meeting with John Engle put me in contact with several OS practitioners in Jacmel. I was privileged to spend time with Johnny Saint Louis who had 8 years of experience with OS in Haïti and was gracious to share his wisdom with me. I incorporated his recommendations to ensure the participation of those who were illiterate to the ones of OS's protocol, to ensure community leaders' participation and engagement.

Luc Bizeul, an OS colleague I had reconnected with while at the World Open Space on Open Space (WOSOS) in Berlin I participated in May 2010 announced that he was coming to Jacmel. When he arrived on my last day of mandate, he expressed interest in taking on an OS forum in a neighbouring commune. I put him in contact with SUCO and the OS community in Jacmel. This connexion gave me a sense of being more than a practitioner alone carrying out my mandate. I felt part of a movement.

Just before returning to Canada, I was privileged to spend time again with John Engle and his wife, to share views about international development in Haïti. Having seen him

on the first day, this meeting closed the loop of my experience in a way that seems to be opening to a spiral of possibilities.

Most importantly throughout the whole process, from one forum to the next the participants gained more and more opportunities to connect.

All of these threads of the web helped me feel supported and strong in this mandate. They proved to be guiding lights in the midst of this chaos and I deeply thank them for their presence.

3. Launching the process with complementary practices to rebalance perspectives

During my preliminary assessment of the context I felt it important to incorporate a complementary approach to OS called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm> and to use Appreciative coaching questions.

Due to past situations and for obvious reasons, it was very easy for Haitians to dwell on the details of the causes and effects of all the problems they were faced with. I felt that this capacity of pointing to the problems may have been overdeveloped over time. In this mindset, with years of catastrophe over catastrophe, their perception of the situation had become so overwhelmingly negative that none knew exactly where to start, which often, if not always, created a state of depleted energy and victimization.

For these reasons, I felt that there was a need to incorporate Appreciative Inquiry elements as a complement to the OS process. I felt the importance of launching the process during the Core Group Meeting by introducing open strength-based AI questions. I also incorporated notions of the AI “Opportunity Tree” at the project identification stage. This, helped launch the process with a mind-shift needed to establish a strength-based foundation for community self-organization.

4. Seeing how On-going OS could strengthen present approaches in international development.

While in Haïti, like during my previous experience with NGOs and CIDA, I was exposed to the more traditional International Development (ID) Community approach. In this approach, regardless of the noble intent of orienting ID to the people’s real needs, most of the funds are put to ID Agencies’ and government priorities and policies that often serve other stakeholders. Executant International NGOs obtain their financing and sustenance from these sponsors and, therefore, need to bend their proposals to the many bureaucratic requirements of these organizations and government agencies.

Many discussions I had, while in Haïti and over the years, confirmed that projects are often led and even carried through by the international community staff, reflecting their values and expectations of economic development. Little concern is given to the milieu and how these people wish to orient their development and the level of commitment they have in making the change sustainable. This often results in fragmented development

where development projects answer to part of identified needs for limited periods of time, with little leadership from the population. When the financing ends and the NGO removes its efforts, the project simply stops or, at worst, the situation returns to what it was at the beginning.

On the other hand, I was privileged to meet John Engle, from the international NGO Haïtian Partners, who is approaching the development of Haïti from the opposite standpoint. With the help of OS forums, the community has become more conscious of their interconnected needs and their passion to lead the change. This created a self-organized and motivated environment. The funds he obtains from his international supporters are applied to these projects. By revisiting the evolving needs with OS forums, the projects evolve with the community. For example: the community decided that what they needed in the area of learning and education was a self-powered "learning and community center". During the day, the center is divided in two classrooms for the student's academic teachings. The division is retractable for other uses of the center, such as: a community center; or training center to build capacities in the different areas of learning ranging from financial training to parental training. They have included computers to ensure computer skills training for people of all ages. All electricity is provided by solar panels.

This project alone would have required funding from different government departments or different departments of international organizations and managed by NGOs of different specializations. Haïtian Partners, accompany the communities in meeting the priority needs of the community that evolve through Open Space. The people who provide the funding have no demands except that the projects be well managed. The management of the projects is transparent. The results are concretely seen on regular film updates of the actual progresses of the projects, on their website. If people want to know more they can pursue further and they are invited to travel to Haïti to help out or witness the results for themselves.

International Community NGOs have started approaching him to provide Haïti Partners with funding but Haïti Partners does not need to bend to their priorities and policies. Haïti Partners wants to consider the people's needs and their leadership as priority.

And so, this report summarizes some of my reflections during this mandate. Although there were AHHA! moments among the participants at every OS forum, it may be pretentious of me to think that the OS process had an immediately noticeable impact on the Cayes Jacmel community. On the one hand, I am confident that this process gave them a chance to communicate among regions like they had never done before. This alone can serve to create the connections that later lead to great achievements. I plan to follow-up later this fall to see what has come of these exchanges. On the other hand SUCO is very pleased with my report and the 8 projects proposed to them by the participants. In light of this experience, I conclude by thanking the wonderful Haïtiens I had the great pleasure to work with and SUCO for giving this great learning opportunity to experience OS and AI in such a challenging context. I also thank John Engle and the OS community for giving this experience its richness.