

# Building Communities through Literacy

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**Abstract** On the Caribbean island of Haiti, when friends meet, one generally asks: “Ki jan ou ye?” (How are you?) and often times the other person responds: “ M’pa pi mal.” (I am not worse), ([2], p. 29). This common greeting indicates that life in Haiti is not stress-free. Haiti has openly battled political chaos, economic dependence, and high illiteracy rates since its independence from France in 1804. Many attempts to address these issues have been made by the international community. Scholars and theorists suggest that solutions should be rooted in building robust communities, using social empathy as a tool, in order to promote independence and sustainability. This paper will investigate the way in which literacy programs such as the one organized locally by BuildOn, builds community. This study is based on a qualitative approach. Numerous focus groups as well as individual in-depth interviews of literacy students, teachers and community members were conducted. Specifically, findings revealed that the benefits of BuildOn’s literacy program are two-fold: first, it fosters community building and, second, it creates capacities for economic independence over time.

**Keywords:** *Community Education Program (CEP), community, literacy, social empathy*

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## 1. Introduction

As I share my travel experiences as a former administrator, teacher and novice researcher in West-Africa and Haiti with others, people often respond negatively, asking questions such as: “Why do you go to developing countries when the same educational needs exist here, next door to you?” This question resonates with me and deserves some attention. Why do I love and strive to promote education in developing countries? Simply put, it is the people. They are genuine, passionate and loving. They embrace life where they are and with the few things they own. They have integrity and a desire to learn. They are generous, despite the fact that they possess close to nothing but their beautiful spirits. When I am around them, I care only about how I can help them achieve their educational needs and goals. The purpose of this paper is to share my experiences among the people of Haiti, focusing on the research I conducted in rural communities in the southwest of the country. I could not agree more with Polkinghorne when he states: “There is no reward for the work except the privilege of doing it.” (1998, pp. 132–133).

In this paper, I will first provide an overview of the geographical, historical and educational context of Haiti. I will then present the methodology used to conduct my research. I will conclude with the findings of the study.

## 2. Background

Understanding the history of Haiti is paramount to comprehending some of the country’s current struggles,

and helps explain why, when friends meet each other, one generally asks: “Ki jan ou ye?” (How are you?) and often times the other person responds: “ M’pa pi mal” (I am not worse), [2]. Ayiti, which in Creole means “Land of high mountains,” occupies one third of what was once known as Hispaniola Island. The Dominican Republic constitutes the other part of this Caribbean island. Despite Haiti’s early independence from the French in 1804, making it the first Black Republic, the country still lacks infrastructures and basic services. Haiti, once prosperous and resourceful, has had a tumultuous past. It began when the French claimed the island as their own in order to exploit the sugar plantations, which led to Haiti becoming richest colony of the world. Sugar was turned into molasses, which was used to make rum. Slaves were brought from Africa to work in the plantations. When Haiti became independent, France enforced an embargo until the Haitians agreed to pay the former colonizer sixty million dollars. Haiti had to borrow money with high interest rates from French banks, and did not finish paying off the debt until 1947.

American occupation of Haiti took place in 1915. The United States saw Haiti as a strategic location because of its proximity to the Panama Canal. The US replaced the Haitian constitution and started to build infrastructures with local labor to serve US needs. During that time Haitians tried to rebuild their own identity, with the Creole language becoming progressively more dominant. However, when the US left the island in 1934, Haiti was still unable to be truly independent. Several dictators such as Papa Doc, his son, Baby Doc, and others, ruled until the recent election of President Martelly in 2011. In addition to its political turmoil, Haiti has barely survived several

hurricanes and earthquakes, each one leaving the republic with less than they had before. Despite the abundant influx of international aid, Haiti has not been able to rise above its status as the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Currently half of the country's budget comes from international help. Additionally, Haiti's current debt amounts to \$1.1 billion dollars. In light of these figures, it is not surprising that 80 percent of the population lives in poverty and the unemployment rate is 40 percent (CIA, 2014). The country heavily depends on agriculture as its main source of exports and income. However, massive deforestation due to the natural disasters as well as the growth in population and the lack of rain and infrastructures have hindered the people's agricultural efforts. As a result, 47 percent of the population is undernourished [29]. Despite these alarming figures, Haiti has

been granted the status of observer as part of the African Union and is awaiting becoming an official member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), whose mission is to stimulate economic collaboration and growth [9].

While external aid has assisted Haiti in fighting illnesses and has provided basic nutrition for some of the population, it has also created a culture of dependency. The total dependency rate, which reflects the number of individuals likely to be economically dependent on others, is estimated at 64 percent, with the youth at 56 percent (CIA, 2014). Haitians would like to change. As Professor Monopol stated in a personal interview: "It will take a revolution of the minds for the mentality of dependency to change but it starts with education" (Personal Communication, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014).



Figure 1. Map of Haiti, the "land of high mountains." Google maps, 2014

The current Haitian educational system is a result of the economic, climatic and societal challenges listed above. Currently, access to education remains primarily a privilege, predominantly reserved for the children of the elite. In a study conducted right after the 2010 earthquake, Vallas & Pankovits found that of those who go to school 90 percent do so in private institutions. This is mainly due to the fact that there is a dearth of public structures, particularly in rural areas. As a result, education is not considered a right, but a luxury that many cannot afford. In addition to the private school fees, most schools still teach in French, preventing many children from learning, leading them to leave school in large numbers, which the authors refer to as a "human tsunami" (2010, p. 12).

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Haitians need to progressively become economically independent. It appears that education, and specifically literacy, could be a solution towards economic growth,

particularly as it contributes to the development of community. By combining their knowledge, skills and will, communities have the ability to positively impact their local economies. In a study on the distribution of land in Haiti, Maguire [20] found that literacy builds communities. One of the participants reported: "The group helps us have pride in ourselves. The authorities here cannot do things as they used to do. We are beginning to insist on our rights" (p. 56). In South Africa, the Londolozzi community used social empathy as a tool to get out of poverty. The involvement of the community was the foundation of the project and was considered the reason for its success on all levels—economic, educational and relational. The model also included a literacy program that fostered community ties and economic growth by involving the inhabitants in the development of their local economy [15]. While these studies confirmed that literacy builds community, which leads to greater economic sustainability, much more research needs to be done. Currently, there are a lack of studies that directly link

literacy with community building and economic sustainability.

The purpose of this research was to address this gap by exploring one literacy program, an American NGO called BuildOn that operates in Les Cayes, Haiti. Specifically, I investigated whether literacy fosters community building, leading to economic sustainability and social growth.

## 4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. In what ways, if any, does the literacy program implemented by buildOn contribute to community building in Haiti?
2. What, if any, are the economic benefits of community building that may be produced through buildOn's literacy programs in Haiti?

## 5. Methodology

For this study, I used a qualitative approach, with buildOn's Community Education Program (CEP) as the unit of analysis. I gathered data through focus group interviews with literacy students and teachers. I also conducted individual interviews with literacy students, teachers and community members. Additionally, I observed classes in session and analyzed diverse documents. I also attended the facilitators' training, which is mandatory after six months of teaching and serves as a refresher course of key concepts pertaining to literacy and practical skills.

### 5.1. Research Sites and Participants

BuildOn's stated mission is "To break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy and low expectations through service and education" [1]. To that end, buildOn has built a total of 611 schools globally, and educated 85,000 parents, children and grandparents. In Haiti, buildOn has built 54 schools since 2001, which are steadily improving opportunities for those living in rural areas. During the disastrous earthquake of 2010, many of these schools were used as shelters. When the children do not use them, missionaries, mobile clinics or evangelization classes sometimes use the schools. What differentiates buildOn from other NGOs that work globally is the emphasis on women's education and building communities. The rural communities work hand in hand with buildOn to build the schools. From the moment the decision is made to build a school, the community has to work for it, laying down the bricks provided by buildOn, and participating in training.

BuildOn's Community Education Program (CEP), launched in 2011, is based on this approach. The community, in conjunction with buildOn, offer the illiterates literacy training, which is led by community facilitators, who have been collaboratively chosen based on their skills. The curriculum not only teaches the participants to read, write, and develop basic numeracy skills, it also teaches them practical skills. Participants learn about health, business, environment, and civic rights. BuildOn's goal is for the communities who have benefited from the literacy program to progressively become independent and models

for the younger generations. My research sites and participants were drawn from these programs.

**Sampling methods.** This research design relied on a mixed purposive sampling of students at different stages in the training. My colleagues from BuildOn and I determined the criteria to choose the participants prior to my arrival. Participants were chosen according to their levels in the Community Education Program, their gender and their age. The final sample included four focus groups in three different communities as follows:

- Students who had begun the training six months before I arrived.
- Students who were one month away from finishing the 18-month training.
- Students who finished the training well over one year before I arrived.
- Students who had suddenly dropped out of the program.

### 5.2. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Out of the focus groups I chose key individuals to interview for further rich data. The outlier method was implemented because those few individuals provided me with additional salient information I might have otherwise missed in the focus group [21]. In addition, I also conducted daily informal interviews with BuildOn's country director, and continually interacted with the program director, as well as all other BuildOn staff, from our driver to the logistics director. I supplemented my data with insights from a focus group of twelve program facilitators, and an in-depth conversation with a community pastor. I also conducted classroom observations and analyzed a number of relevant documents. Finally, I analyzed and coded supplemental data that included my journal, memos and field notes.

**Interview procedures.** Most of the data for this study were collected via unstructured, open-ended interviews conducted in Creole and translated into French. The program director or a BuildOn staff member served as my interpreter. The individual interviews were conducted in an informal way and concerned the lived experience of the participants. Patton notes that informal conversations are more flexible "in pursuing information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate" (2002, p. 342). The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed in French, which is my native tongue. My interpretation of the data can be described as an "effort of sense-making...[which] includes intuition, past experience, emotion" ([34], p. 33).

**Document review.** Document analysis consisted of the literacy textbooks, samples of students' work, evaluations and tests, and facilitators' evaluations of their wishes and needs. These documents were key to understanding the content of the curriculum and how it was taught.

**Data analysis.** I used an inductive analysis process in order to discover patterns, themes and categories. To facilitate this, I applied second cycle coding and axial coding to the data to ensure that I retrieved as much rich information as I could ([24], p. 213). I was able to extract convergences and recurring regularities among my multitude sources of data that way. Because I was interested in the ways that the literacy program may have fostered community building, the use of analysis of

narratives seemed appropriate in order to reveal the experiences of the participants that related to community before, during and after the program [6]. To respect the participants' ideas, I will cite them verbatim throughout this paper. I will also include passages from my journal to provide more context.

**Trustworthiness.** In designing the study, I took a series of precautions to preserve the integrity of the study and to avoid validity threats or what Huck & Sandler refer to as 'rival hypotheses' (1979). First, I gathered rich data [11]. Second, I triangulated the data through the use of a variety of sources. The interview process included a pilot of the questions prior to the research study, open-ended questions, and asking participants questions in different ways to assure that I was hearing them correctly. I also looked for convergence in the data before conducting individual in-depth interviews. Finally, I was able to compare the data between four sites, as well as to similar programs around the world.

## 6. Theoretical Framework

My research framework begins with the belief that the ecosystem in which we all live is interconnected with each of us as human beings, which has been described as Human Ecology Theory [5]. An offshoot of this is family theory, which suggests that we may be part of different eco-systems, but that these are ultimately part of one [4]. While some systems have more resources than others, we all use the same air, and we are all dependent upon our respective environment. An example of these theoretical premises could be that the earth is sending messages to the rest of the systems when certain spheres such as Haiti or Japan suffer deleterious damages from natural disasters over and over again. Perhaps the recent tsunamis and massive earthquakes in various parts of the globe are a manifestation of the earth's anger and a call for us to think more globally.

This notion of being interconnected has also been applied in the field of psychology by Cook-Greuter, who argues that the few individuals who have the capacity to reach the Ironist stage of development are those able to think, see and feel beyond the conscious level (2005). This holistic approach is also reflected in some of the groundbreaking work by Ken Wilber, which he calls *Integral Life* [32]. The leadership field is currently embracing this concept as well. For example, Wheatley affirms that interconnected networks constitute new hope for lasting improvements for humanity [31]. In other words, the world is no longer about individuals, but about relationships--those we hold to the earth, the fauna, flora and our families and peers. When applied to leadership, the notion of interconnectedness will lead to results that will not only improve and transform individuals and organizations, but enable lasting global changes [23,30].

Leadership can take different shapes and forms. Whether formal or informal, research has shown that leadership is most effective when coming from the ground up, or through grassroots movements [15,25,31]. My hypothesis is that through education, individuals and families form local communities and informal leadership systems, an interconnectedness that can lead to the betterment of their collective lives through the deeper

understanding of the individual and collective needs, deep listening and shared experiences, which are foundational for social empathy. Recent research and my lived experiences have demonstrated that the use of social empathy in communities is an efficient way to foster transformational and distributed leadership within these systems, to achieve perennial communal educational, social and economical growth [1,15,25,26]. Barker defines social empathy as "the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person" (2003, p. 141). Scholars such as Groch et al. [15] add that social empathy "requires all stakeholders to have an intimate and holistic understanding of a community's entire local situation" (p. 155). As an example, the authors argue that education is a vital instrument in reducing population growth, which is generally an issue in developing countries where the resources cannot support their people. Using social empathy as a tool would facilitate respect for the environment and the eco-system, and enhance sustainability. Polkinghorne describes sustainability as

"Sustainable refers to a future to respect the needs of generations yet unborn. The earth's non-renewable resources are not to be squandered in gratifying current conspicuous consumption, but they should be conserved as much as possible in order to provide for those who will come after us, as well as for ourselves and those in need" (1998, pp. 132-133).

According to Segal [25], social empathy also provides a way to address poverty and promote social justice. Gerdes and Segal [26] take the latter concept one step further by introducing the concept of mimic in social empathy positing that our brain is wired to mirror actions due to *mirror neurons*, which they contend everyone has.

I believe that using social empathy, as a tool to teach and develop within communities would enhance relationships as well as long-term social and economic yields. Based on our interconnectedness as described above, I suggest that the systematic and systemic use of social empathy would promote collective growth. Furthermore, I argue that literacy promotes this process of interconnection or community, in that it brings people together who have common goals and interests.

Before examining the research findings, it is salient to explain why community building is essential for Haiti. According to Greenfield's definition of society, which is an urban environment with complex economic roles, high levels of technology and resources, as well as a plethora of educated people, Haiti does not comply. Rather Haiti is a community. As such, the country ought to work with the strengths it embodies as a community [14]. Specifically, advocacy consists of meeting people where they are, and adapting to them and their needs [27]. Communities and grassroots movements are embedded in the Haitian culture. Because of the country's agitated and unstable political past, Haitians have gathered in 'popular organizations' (PO) ever since the Duvalier dictatorship. Those organizations, often led by the youth, aimed to fight to regain some political power and to restore individual identities. From these movements, the creation of the first radio in Creole surfaced. Radio Soleil played music and programs that the populace could understand and that was to the people's taste. Still today, it is common for people to gather in the streets to protest. Though these

organizations have not been a panacea to the numerous challenges the country has faced, they have given the people a voice, and some relative power [19]. In this way, we can begin to see that the local people are the solution not the problem [10].

Coleman suggests that human capital (the knowledge or time people have) and financial capital are interdependent and affect the social capital, which is based on family and community relationships (2011). The author argues that tacit and intergenerational relationships alike have the potential to either positively or negatively affect the social and economic balance of a system. Tseng & Seidman posit that politicians make new laws, and invest money in structures, hoping that the new laws will change what has not worked for decades, but they omit one critical factor, the relationships people have and the power and knowledge that comes from them as a result. Involving the local communities in their own growth seems to be one way to eradicate poverty [16]. Based on the literature and my hypothesis, it appears that community development through education and social empathy could play an integral part in the solution to terminate the status of shared poverty in Haiti.

## 7. Findings

This study seeks to answer in what ways, if any, the literacy program implemented by BuildOn contributes to community building in Haiti. It also seeks to demonstrate what, if any, are the economic benefits of community building that may be produced through BuildOn's literacy programs in Haiti.

Three significant findings emerged from this research. The first finding is that literacy builds individual and collective identities. The second finding is that literacy builds strong relationships. The final finding is that literacy has a positive educational and economic impact on the community.

### 7.1. Literacy Builds Individual and Collective Identity

There is one aspect of the program that had a significant impact for *every participant* and is an overarching theme of the findings: the ability to write one's name. As one participant expressed: "Our parents gave us a name but we could not read it or write it, now we can." Being able to write their names gave the participants an individual and collective identity. Another woman shared that she hid at her daughter's wedding because she could not sign her name and felt so ashamed. She could not enjoy the celebration, but the program changed that.

### 7.2. Literacy Program Builds Strong Relationships

On many occasions, the participants stated that attending the literacy program enabled them to build strong relationships. Everyone commented on the social aspect of program, noting that it allowed them to create a "better atmosphere" in the community, which they also labeled "better animation." Other participants gave examples of how the community comes together in moments of need. A woman who had stopped the program said: "I

miss the community a lot and feel ashamed to have stopped. I remember when the teachers kept coming to my door and tell me to come back to the program. I also remember when the other people in class came by my house to bring me the homework when I had missed class." Another women stated: "When we are in the fields working, we take turn to bring food and water and we all share now. Before it was not like that. This is new." Another member of the community mentioned how the community now comes together in prayer when someone passes or when someone is in need. She added: "when someone needs something or is sick and cannot pay for the medicines, we all give a little something."

Another considerable impact has been in regards to social etiquette. Many women and even men enjoyed learning about proper social manners and etiquette. They learned, for example, how to properly sit and speak in public. They learned how to respect others through the appropriate use of words and gestures. One participant mentioned that, "Before, at the market when someone tried to bargain, I used to insult them; now I know how to speak to them and to explain to them why I cannot lower my prices." A male participant added: "Now I know how to treat my spouse and kids, I mean.... treat them as human beings." Some respondents offered that the training and practical skills enhanced their professional relationships and the trust in their families. An older respondent said: "Now we have reserves, when we speak," meaning the students learned to not say everything and hold some thoughts when appropriate, which led to having stronger relationships in the community.

Another social benefit the participants listed, particularly the women, was that the program was an outlet for them, a way to escape stress and have fun. They also said that they now see others socially, whereas before they would not. The participants who had stopped the program noted this as well. They not only missed learning, but felt excluded from the community and the society at large, despite the communities' numerous attempts to bring them back to the program.

A significant benefit is that now participants are able to read the bible and songs in church. Many participants also mentioned this aspect. One woman proudly stated: "Now I can even help at church when people become a member, I can write their names." An elder gentleman who had finished with the program said he still read the bible every day as a way to practice his skills. A woman rejoiced as she shared: "Now I can sing and read the words."

A gentleman brought up the fact that he could now read letters he received and thus not miss a court date or another important meeting that he would otherwise not have attended because of a lack of understanding.

To conclude, being able to write and read gave participants confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging within their local community and the community at large. Participants learned the skills necessary to address each other politely, whether in a social or business context. They also formed networks of friendships and are now able to seek support and have fun with each other. Additionally, through BuildOn's literacy program, men and women felt empowered and regained their once lost individual and collective identities.

*Researcher journal on the topic: "There was a moment in the class where I had to hold my breath. This beautiful,*

*strong woman stood up to speak about the social impact of the program on her, her family and the community. She was confident, powerful, spoke concisely and glowed. Everyone around her was listening to her words. I thought 'she could be the next community leader.'*"

### 7.3. The Educational and Economic Impact

As we saw earlier, BuildOn's Community Education Program has enabled participants to feel empowered, build strong relationships and communities and helped to regain self and collective identities. It is now time to turn and see the other impacts the program has had on its participants.

**Educational impact.** A large number of women interviewed mentioned the fact they can now help their children with their homework and the children can help them practice. They also suggested that going to literacy school improved their relationships with their family and with their children in particular. Many women spoke about gaining respect and trust from their children. One interviewee said: "Before, my children lied to me about homework--now they cannot because I can read. Also now the teacher pays more attention to my children because she knows I am getting an education and she knows I can help them at home." When I conducted the individual interviews, it became clear to me that these women were thirsty for knowledge. They are ready to learn more and share their knowledge with future generations. Now that they have access to knowledge, they see no limit or reason to stop learning and improving their lives. One woman confidently reported: "Now I can go to the embassy and sign paper to go."

Researcher journal on this comment: "I must say that I had to ask clarifications when the lovely woman spoke about going to the embassy. It took me by surprise! When I asked her to repeat and confirm what I had heard, she confidently said that now she could travel and that the world was no longer "closed to her". The program had opened some doors, unleashed the power of local women, talked to their souls and hearts....these women are strong and are the backbone of the country.

Participants cited many benefits of becoming literate and how it had affected their lives in many ways. On example was that of the reading of medical labels: "Before, I did not know how much medicine to give to my child, now I can read on the bottle and help others." A few participants spoke about the sexual education they received, and the discussions they had in class about current illnesses in the country and how to recognize and help cure the symptoms. They also spoke about learning about nutrition and hygiene around water consumption and cleanliness. One woman mentioned that she now cleans more attentively around the kitchen and does not allow chickens in her space. It was also noted that this literacy program gives them a way to relieve stress, laugh, make friends and thus improve their well-being.

**Economic benefits.** Participants cited several benefits of becoming literate and how it had affected their economic sustainability. Many participants mentioned now being able to sign their names at the bank to receive money that family members are sending from abroad, or to get a loan. A man said: "Now I can buy cattle and when I do, I can read the description of the beast I am about to buy; I am more informed before I make my

purchase." Another man from another community said: "Now I can give the correct change back at the market; before it was vague, I could not count. This will help me make more profits and buy more things from the community after." From the data analyzed, it is apparent that the CEP has improved the individual and collective lives' of the locals. It also seems to have had a positive economic impact.

## 8. Discussion and Implications for Further Research

After conducting extensive interviews for one week, observing classes and the communities, it appeared that the Community Education Program positively impacts its participants on the individual, family and community levels. Being able to read, write and count gave the participants back an identity, motivated them, and enabled them to understand the power of community. One community had already created a community garden for themselves and shared that their next step is to collectively buy a mill to grind corn and sell the flour. They aspire to create a Cooperative.

The personal benefits participants gained from the BuildOn program had visible ripple effects on the community. The practical skills needed locally were taught and decided upon by the Haitian people. Intentionally or not, BuildOn has also successfully used social empathy as a foundation for its work. From the construction of the schools to the CEP program, the community takes part in the work that must be done and is also part of the decision making process. In turn, these community relationships at the micro level will hopefully affect the macro level and create lasting educational, social, and economic growth.

This initial qualitative study has enabled us to understand the impact of a literacy program, the CEP, on individuals, families and communities. Additional longitudinal studies are needed, however, to assess future progress or discrepancies. Studies could be conducted across generations and genders, as well as in different rural communities. I would also recommend that such research be contextualized and conducted in other developing countries to determine whether similar patterns exist. Additional studies could compare other French former colonies with Haiti. Research could also investigate whether communities gain leadership after the training, and if so, how this takes place and in what ways they use it. In addition, research could focus on women and their entrepreneurship. Additional research could also look at similar communities and programs that are not using social empathy as a tool to build community and note convergences and differences.

## 9. Significance of the Study and Limitations

As I have shown, this study offers critical insights into the relationship between literacy, community building and economic sustainability. However, there are limitations, which I will explain before I explore the significance further.

## 9.1. Limitations

I am a white, middle-aged woman, who entered a new culture and environment for only seven days. I used an interpreter, which can cause the questions and/or answers to be slightly altered since we cannot translate word by word but have to translate in context. The interpreter was a staff member of the organization. However, since I could understand some Creole and the participants could understand some French, I feel confident that my data was not altered beyond what it means to work in a different language than my native tongue and writing in my second language. Additionally, this was my first time in Haiti and first time working for BuildOn, limiting my grasp on the whole culture and tacit norms. Despite these limitations, I believe that this research is a strong basis for future research. I see it as a step forward towards understanding the impact literacy programs, such as the CEP, have on building communities and promoting economic sustainability.

## 9.2. Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it sets the stage for others to follow. The current study demonstrated that BuildOn's literacy program, using a model of social empathy, builds community and might be a way to gradually provide economic sustainability. The study is significant for any non-profit organization whose goal is to assist growth in developing countries. This work is also valuable for educators, policy makers and governmental agencies who provide funding or manpower to the destitute countries around the world. It demonstrates that by using social empathy as a tool, both manpower and funding can have positive lasting effects and lead the locals to greater independence.

## 10. Conclusion

Literacy programs offer incredible potential for lasting change that goes beyond education in developing programs. However, unless they utilize the inherent gifts of the local community and culture, they will be greatly limited. For example, involving the locals in the decision making of how to use the donations given for these programs is crucial to the success of the measures taken and the lasting growth. In the communities I visited, BuildOn gives the graduate an initiative fund to use at their discretion. This fund aims at assisting the communities towards becoming economically independent. In the past some communities have grown community gardens, bought goats or started a cooperative with the money allocated. From there, some communities have been able to sell more items at the market, and re-invest the money into their businesses, progressively building economic sustainability. The funds are also meant to mobilize the community and allow them to put the skills they learned in class into practice.

In essence, combining social empathy and literacy in developing countries could be a way to end poverty and restore pre-colonialization economic and social status, as well as educational confidence and prosperity. If the massive amounts of international aid for Haiti and other countries had been implemented through the lens of human ecology theory and applied with robust social

empathy, I believe that they would be better off today and not so dependent.

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