“We, the people of Gojet, we are like the “wozo” tree that bends but is not broken. Hurricane Matthew has taken all our riches; our homes have fallen, our gardens are devastated. But we are here tied to our land. We cannot be destroyed. We always have hope. We will work and rise again because we are like the “wozo” tree; we are not broken, we are only bent.”

Open Space Theme Song
March 2017
“True development must be in the hands of the people. If it is not envisioned by the people, owned by the people, and managed by the people, it will surely fail.”

I cannot tell how many times I heard my father proclaim this message. As the founder of FIDA, he was determined to understand the root cause of Haiti’s poverty. He was not interested in what he saw as “band aid” solutions that often barely disguised the longing of Haitians to have the help they really needed. “Haiti, is a graveyard of good intentions,” my father would often retort. Even today that graveyard remains a reality. It is difficult for well-meaning people to see that that their well-meaning efforts have done little to make a difference. It is more difficult to accept it and then change actions accordingly. My father was willing to “dream the impossible and to dare the difficult.” He believed that the riches of God’s resources were at the call of aggressive thinkers. That type of thinking and acting led him to see the desire of Haitian men and women to be at the centre of their own development; to be owners and managers of their own enterprise. They just didn’t know what that looked like or if anyone cared enough to help them achieve such. How many times have we heard in the field, “We did not know this (cooperative) was a choice for us!” The impact of this was no more evident then in the wake of Hurricane Matthew and in the words of the members of the Gojet Cooperative, “We are here tied to our land. We cannot be destroyed. We always have hope. We will work and rise again because we are like the ‘wozo’ tree; we are not broken, we are only bent.”
Reconstruction and Restoration begins with new funding…

With funding approved from a second World Renew/CFGB farming families will begin to recover their livelihoods from the devastation of Hurricane Matthew. What will this look like?

- **Agricultural Recovery**: includes provision of seeds, tools, grafting technology and fruit trees
- **Agricultural Capacity-Building**: offers training in improved crop management, conservation techniques, and in community organizing.
- **Water Management**: household cisterns will be rehabilitated to nurture garden produce in dry season; along with three communal water catchment structures to sustain year round planting of plantains and taro.

The role of pcH is to restore the capacity of cooperatives; to nurture leadership, skills, resources, knowledge and tools of the community, to enable them to organize, address, and have greater control over the conditions and factors that affect their quality of life.
The forum was “Open Space”, a tool of participatory methodology. The place was Gojet, one of three cooperatives that were a victim of Hurricane Matthew’s fury. The topic was, “How do we restore our lives after Hurricane Matthew?” Under wind battered tarps gathered 120 men and women determined to share their ideas, unite in their priorities and to prepare an action plan for their immediate future. They are all farmers. Not everyone can read or write. It is important that everyone understands everything. The rules of Open Space are announced out loud and repeated over and over by everyone. They are told that ideas are like products in their garden. When a person presents an idea, it is like taking their product to market so everyone can see it. Their idea becomes the idea of everyone.

Fourteen ideas are placed in the “market” and then distilled into seven “Big Ideas”. Those who had initiated the idea are asked to choose a product to represent their idea. All must agree. So, a plantain is chosen for house reconstruction, an eggplant for agriculture, a meliton for literacy, a sweet pepper for credit, garlic for health, a carrot for water and an orange for reforestation. Now, everyone chooses which product idea they want to sit and discuss. They will address the challenges they have around the idea as well as the solutions they have in mind. Thus ends Day One.

Day Two begins with everyone singing a song about literacy, “We will never again sign an ‘X’ for our name. How much shame we had when we could only do that! Literacy is what we are searching for. It helps us understand. When we are given a salve for our skin, we eat it because we do not know better. But with literacy, we know better. We sing this song for Premier. We are thankful that you invest in us. May God bless you to continue to be with us.”
It is voting day. After each group presents their thoughts around each of the Seven Big Ideas, and everyone is given an opportunity to add anything they think is missing. Then voting begins! The process is carefully explained, demonstrated and repeated. Each is given seven green sticker dots to place according to their priority or priorities. Upon completion, each dot is counted aloud for each product idea. Reconstruction (plantain) and water (carrot), have the most votes followed by agriculture (eggplant) and credit (sweet pepper). Day Two ends with great anticipation.

Day Three is of most importance as it is the day of action planning, “Why is this idea important? When should it be done? Who will do what? What do we need to get it done?” The discussion is lively. They express how they once were a thriving community. And now all is destroyed: our homes, our crops, our gardens, and our animals. “Agriculture,” they say, “is like our father and mother. It provides us with everything. Now we cannot stand. We are beginning as if we are infants. We are left with our skills, our experience, and the eyes of pcH. They taught us how to protect the soil. It is now destroyed. We need to begin again.”

And so they shall. We will be there with them to restore what they once had with fresh ideas, new seeds, renewed capacity for organization, leadership, and strength to be a greater and more vibrant and productive community.
Following Hurricane Matthew, pcH was the first to respond, providing communities in Duchity with dry rations, water, sanitation, nutritional advice, support groups, and counseling. Despite our best efforts, malnutrition was becoming very evident in children. We immediately undertook an exhaustive survey of all children aged 6 months to 4 years in order to have a better grasp of the situation.

With funding received through Waterloo-based, World Accord, we aimed to educate mothers on providing proper care and nutrition for their children and introduced twice-weekly culinary classes. Prior to the launch of the project, all representatives of the various health ministries and cooperative leaders were engaged in discussion of the strategy. Screening sessions were undertaken using the brachial perimeter to assess levels of malnutrition. Albendazole, a water treatment product, was distributed to children who have scabies, along with receiving proper treatment and medication.

In order to be most effective with funds received, we trained “mother leaders” who, in turn, were required to train other mothers in need, who in turn, would train others and so on.

The rainy season was a constraint as mothers are fearful to walk the distances to participate in the training. Mothers were also concerned about other members of their family. With the engagement of a new funding partner, (Human Concern) follow up on this project is now possible. This will allow for the children taking part to have 15 consecutive days of a balanced diet, successfully reducing the affects of malnutrition.
Literacy classes are given a boost!

Thanks to the GayLea Foundation, FIDA/pcH was able to meet the intense demand for literacy in Zoranger. Last fall we began in faith, with a commitment to raise funds for 300 participants. Within weeks, we were overwhelmed with more than double our budget, over 600 men and women hungry to learn to read and write! Through a member of our farming constituency in Waterloo, we became aware of the recently established GayLea Foundation and applied for a two-year commitment for literacy support. As a cooperative, GayLea resonates with the principles of cooperative that we apply and practice in Haiti. Our application was accepted and we were able to open another ten centres to accommodate another 300 people (each centre averages about 25-30 participants).

However, the cooperative members of Zoranger are unstoppable in their vision. As the New Year began, we were compelled to open another four centres. This we did in May and now we have 737 literacy participants in 25 centres… with a waiting list. We are grateful yet challenged to keep up to this deep desire for the poor to have their “eyes opened”, to be able to soar out of the depths of destitution, to no longer know the humility of signing an “X” for their name. “No more X” is their cry.

Will you help us end it?
When my wife Kim and I lived in Haiti from 2008-2010 we would routinely run into challenges that were unique to living in a developing country like Haiti. These challenges ranged from learning Kreyol to navigating our way around Port-au-Prince. One evening Kim went out to the grocery store after dark while I was still away teaching. Just a few blocks from our apartment she accidentally drove over an open sewer getting her front passenger side wheel stuck in the large hole. There was no way she was going to be able to drive out of that massive hole. It was dark. Kim was alone and frightened in a country she barely knew at the time. Men began to come from all around and soon a large group had congregated around the vehicle. Kim recalls being unsure what was about to happen, especially with her limited Kreyol. It was at that moment that the beauty and magic of Haiti revealed itself. Suddenly the men began to lift the car up. In a couple of minutes the group of Haitian men had successfully removed the tire from the open sewer. No tow truck was needed, and Kim was on her way driving safely into the night.

There are times when all of us need others to lift us up and provide support. We have all had moments when we need encouragement and a gentle push in the right direction. For many of us our parents provided that emotional support alongside the financial investment we might have needed to go to college or start a business. In the countryside of Haiti where FIDA/pCH works, the challenges are often large and multiple. There is perhaps no greater challenge than addressing the obstacle of illiteracy. The literacy rate in Haiti is roughly 50%. In the rural areas of the country that number is closer to 80%. Many of the cooperative members that FIDA/pCH work with have never had the opportunity to attend school primarily due to the inability of their families to afford the cost. This is even a bigger problem for girls who are often left to work at home securing water, doing household chores and caring for their young siblings while their brothers attend school. Without an ability to read and write illiterate men and women struggle to advance themselves economically and socially. They face humiliation when they cannot sign their names and instead must use their thumbprint and make an “X” when signing a document. They live in fear of being taken advantage of due to their illiteracy. These peasant farmers go through life without the self-confidence and sense of self-worth that can help them transcend the challenges that they face daily. In short, the illiterate cooperative members that FIDA/pCH work alongside need partners to help lift them up and send them on their way to a better tomorrow.

In my first two years of serving as Executive Director of FIDA U.S., I have been extremely fortunate to find great partners who understand the importance of literacy as a tool for transforming communities and creating sustainable development. Without the commitment and lifting up of these partners, FIDA U.S. would not be able to contribute to the life-giving work being done in Haiti. On behalf of our still new organization and the people of Haiti, I would like to say, thank you to our wonderful partners who have invested in our literacy program. Without your commitment to being in the solidarity with the Haitian people, the challenges in the communities that we partner with would be even greater. Together, we are working to create opportunities for those who have historically been neglected and, in turn, we are lifting up Haitians through education and supporting the dream for a better tomorrow.