

# HPG Background Paper

## Remittances in crises A Haiti case study

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### The storm

Tropical Storm Jean, or 'cyclone Jeanne' as it is referred to in Haiti, brought rains that inundated the coastal plane of Artibonite Department, and caused monumental damage in the country's third largest city, Gonaïves. By most estimates, between 17 and 19 September 2004, the storm killed some 3,000 people. The rains led to heavy flooding, exacerbated by the fact that the sewage canals running through the streets had not been cleaned in years, and thus clogged and were unable to absorb the water. Eighty per cent of the city was under water for about three days. Worse, mountains and hills deforested by peasants who eke out their living by burning trees for charcoal surround the city. Tons of heavy mud from these barren hillsides filled streets, canals and buildings. There was little food or potable water at first; people fled with only the clothes they were wearing. Communication lines were cut and residents were unable to reach family or friends. Three days passed before some vehicles could enter or leave the city.

The international community responded to Jeanne. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) issued an emergency appeal for USD 32 million for the affected population (MINUSTAH, 2004) and governments in Asia, Europe and North America dispatched massive relief assistance. United Nations (UN) agencies and dozens of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), small and large, launched relief operations. Humanitarian bodies already present in the country redeployed staff to the flooded area. Thousands of Haitians living outside of the country also raised money and sent goods, sometimes channelling their contributions through international relief entities.

Delivering relief assistance to Gonaïves was far from easy. First, the roads were blocked with standing water, debris and mud. Second, would-be first responders in the city were themselves victims of the disaster, many having lost family members and property. Hence, they were unable to access the resources they needed or to communicate with one another. Third, the country already was in a state of crisis due to the political situation. Fourth, the government was unprepared and only peripherally involved in relief efforts.

### Gonaïves: the context

With the ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in late February 2004, the already high levels of violence and insecurity in Haiti increased further. The weak transition government that replaced Aristide was buttressed by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) from the end of April, with a mandate to restore and maintain rule of law, safety and public order and to promote human rights. Rule of law and public

order were far from being in place at the time Jeanne struck the Haitian coast and destroyed Gonaïves. As humanitarian relief was made available and distributed throughout the city, humanitarian agencies had to rely on MINUSTAH's armed presence to protect deliveries and prevent looting.

Gonaïves has seen less violence than Haiti's capital, Port au Prince, but it is subject to the same insecurity, corruption, crime, unemployment and weak, ineffective government that affect the capital and the rest of the country. It is a port city, but the harbour has ceased to function. Overall, the town is poor, lacking major sources of income generation, although, as in all cities, a few people are wealthy, and there is a modestly sized middle class. Since it is a commercial centre, and located in an agricultural area, it has attracted newcomers from smaller towns. A major attraction for numerous Haitian families from these smaller towns is that Gonaïves has public schools and a larger number of private secondary schools. Families continue to migrate and settle there for short or long periods in order to send their children to school. Apart from Gonaïves, Artibonite Department lacks educational facilities beyond the primary grades. The city is politically very diverse and has experienced political violence on occasion. The general impression of the population is one of shared frustration and cynicism regarding government, including the possible outcomes of the elections that were about to take place at the time of writing (January 2006). Officially, employment in the city is reported to be only 20 per cent (Oxfam, 2005) and people without full-time employment survive by engaging in part-time occasional work in the informal sector. Clearly, enforced idleness and minimal opportunities to earn an income have added to frustration among the population.

The city remains scarred to a great degree by the hurricane that overwhelmed it on 18 September 2004; everybody's memories of Jeanne are acute. There are signs of reconstruction at sites all over the town, but one finds far more indicators of the storm's destructive legacy. One still comes across visible signs of water damage and semi-destroyed buildings in virtually the entire urban area and surrounding rural and semi-rural zones. The streets are in a deplorable condition.

A CARE-sponsored project has been working to clean the drainage canals that run along these streets to prevent future flooding and so there are (dangerously) deep gutters running along the major roads. Schools, clinics and public buildings appear to be operating normally. Most were closed for approximately three months after the hurricane and some previously functional health centres and schools have not reopened. Small shops that sell food items, clothing and other such items are busy, but an unknown number of such small enterprises have failed to recover from the hurricane.



## Chapter 2

# The study

This study of Haiti is part of the project of the Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to compare three cases (Sri Lanka, Somalia and Haiti) where remittance flows are believed to have contributed to survival and recovery. Remittances to Haiti over the past decade have far exceeded foreign aid or international investment. Although ongoing research has established the value of remittances to developing countries generally, the particular issue of their role in emergencies has yet to be examined. This study assesses how people in Gonaïves used remittances both from the Haitian diaspora and from internal sources during and after the city was all but destroyed by the September 2004 hurricane. It is based on information obtained during fieldwork in Gonaïves in January 2006, and is supplemented by reports issued by international humanitarian agencies active in the country at the time of the disaster. The findings encompass information from recipients of remittances in Gonaïves, but not from the Haitian migrants, either inside or outside of the country, who provided them.

### Support for the research

ODI and the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University discussed the proposed research with two major NGOs working in Haiti: CARE and Oxfam UK. Both expressed interest in the results and offered to support the survey logistically and substantively. This was crucial. Oxfam UK staff based in the Port au Prince office made plans and arrangements for the researcher's nine-day stay in the country, and the programme officer accompanied the researcher to Gonaïves to begin work. CARE, which still has a large project in Gonaïves, employing some 400 people, organised the actual programme. CARE officials accompanied the researcher to six sites where the agency has been operating and arranged for community leaders to bring together groups for discussions. CARE also made arrangements for interviews with remittance transfer agencies and bank personnel. CARE and Oxfam officials introduced the study and the researcher to those who assembled, and translated from Creole to French. Appendix 1 contains a list of individuals who offered the most important assistance.

### Interviews

Formal interviews were held with community groups, followed by separate interviews, which went into greater depth, with individuals from these communities. Officials in remittance transfer agencies and banks, Haitian local officials and NGO officials were also interviewed about their institutional and personal experiences.

The six neighbourhoods where groups were assembled were the sites of ongoing CARE operations. CARE has distributed food and

worked with community organisations to manage water and sanitation systems and to establish productive projects. These communities, listed in Appendix 2, were selected in order to cover:

- established neighbourhoods in the city;
- newer neighbourhoods whose populations are made up of a higher percentage of people not originally from Gonaïves; and
- rural agricultural communities on the outskirts of Gonaïves.

The CARE officials who accompanied the researcher arranged in advance for community leaders to bring together those who wished to participate in a discussion of remittances. While residents were told of the subject to be discussed, a minority of the people who chose to attend identified themselves as recipients of remittances from outside of the country. Virtually all acknowledged receiving assistance from family members still in the country.

Among the interviewees were people who had come to Gonaïves from other towns in Artibonite Department, either to send children to secondary schools, which, as noted above, are lacking in most places, and/or because they perceived commercial opportunities to be greater. The focus groups themselves, involving between 12 and approximately 35 people, had a fair balance of men and women, young and old. A number of those present actively participated in community organisations. The researcher conducted eight structured individual interviews and entered into around a dozen less formal conversations that covered much the same ground. Although no two interviews were identical, general information can be gleaned from among the questions in Appendix 3.

While the interviews spanned the diverse population of Gonaïves, they undoubtedly were weighted toward the poorer segments of the community, since these are the sectors with which CARE and others have been working. Largely, the focus group participants were people who had worked productively prior to the hurricane and earned incomes that, although low, had sustained them. It was abundantly clear that significant portions of the population, relatively economically self-sufficient before the hurricane, were less able than before to support themselves, due in very large part to the losses suffered and from which they had not yet recovered.

The interviews and conversations were not limited to the community groups and individuals attended by CARE and other NGOs. They also included remittance transfer agency and bank representatives, NGO personnel, students, teachers and other professionals—people with middle-class status based on the income standards of the country. Middle-class salaries in a Haitian context can be quite low. A group of teachers said that



they received wages ranging from just below to slightly more than USD 100 per month. Humanitarian agency workers earned somewhat more, but given the high cost of living in Haiti, they described themselves as barely scraping by. These groups experienced similar losses and recounted sometimes insurmountable difficulties in trying to recover. Whereas only a minority of those in the focus groups said that they obtained remittances from relatives outside of Haiti, a much larger number of the middle-class respondents said that they received forms of assistance from relatives outside of the country during and after the hurricane. This is not surprising, since, as in most migrant sending nations, the poorer segments of Haitian society lack resources to finance migration in the first place, and those able to migrate earn little.

### Amounts and types of overseas remittances

Taken together, Haitian migrant and other transfers for 2005 are expected to show an estimated value of USD 919 million.<sup>1</sup> This is a huge figure for a poor country with a population of slightly more than eight million, but it is not disaggregated by place, type of recipient, average amounts or intended use and it is not limited to family remittances. According to the World Bank's most recent country overview, private transfers, mainly remittances, have more than doubled from USD 256 million in 1997 to USD 650 million in 2002, representing 19 per cent of Haiti's gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank, 2004, p. 3). Already, remittances are well over 100 per cent of the value of the nation's exports and surpass international assistance. Most remittance funds come from the United States,<sup>2</sup> followed by Canada and France. However, the monthly remittances sent by Haitians in the US average only USD 179.<sup>3</sup> Although significant numbers of Haitians live in the Dominican Republic,<sup>4</sup> Jamaica and the Bahamas, and sacrifice their own well-being to send or transport remittances, the amounts overall are still small.<sup>5</sup>

In a World Bank study of three countries that reported increased remittance levels in the years immediately following a disaster, the remittance rise in Haiti after Jeanne is the most pronounced (World Bank, 2005, p. 100).<sup>6</sup> Undeniably, the hurricane is not the sole cause of this phenomenon. A brief and very modest economic improvement in Haiti ended in the late 1990s and the early years of the new millennium due to the political crisis and the consequent loss of donor and investor confidence (World Bank, 2004). Dependence on remittances has grown as the country's economy overall has deteriorated.

<sup>1</sup> World development indicators and World Bank staff calculations, based on IMF (2004). Tables in World Bank (2006) show the increasing level of remittances following disasters. The increase in Haiti is the sharpest (World Bank, 2005, p. 100).

<sup>2</sup> The US census for 2000 shows the Haitian population to be just short of 420,000. Some 15–20,000 may be entering each year (United States Census Bureau, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Orozco, M. et al., 2005, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> An estimated 600,000 Haitians live in the Dominican Republic (Orozco, M. et al., 2005, p. 46).

<sup>5</sup> The median amount sent from the Dominican Republic is USD 67 (Orozco, M. et al., 2005, p. 46).

<sup>6</sup> A table in *Global Economic Prospects 2006* documents this phenomenon for Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Honduras. The effect is strongest for Haiti (World Bank, 2005, p. 100).

How much in terms of remittances normally reaches the residents of Gonaïves? Were there major increases following Jeanne? Anecdotal evidence suggests that a fairly large number of people in Gonaïves receive remittances from different family sources, with variable frequency, but in smaller average quantities than for the nation as a whole. Immediately after the hurricane, family remittances were supplemented by collective remittances. Haitian migrants sent tens of thousands of US dollars, channelled through relief agencies such as the American Red Cross, Caritas, local churches and spontaneously formed relief committees. Churches inside and outside of Haiti served as points of transmission for private relief efforts. The research did not uncover any ongoing collective resources destined for Gonaïves.

The remittance agencies/banks interviewed (CAM, Fonkoze (Fondasyon Kole Zepòl), Soge and UniBank<sup>7</sup>) did not disclose the precise number of clients. A director of one of the smaller operations in Gonaïves estimated that, prior to Jeanne, he served approximately 90 clients, who received average payments of USD 100, which came at irregular intervals. The number of clients, he said, grew significantly following the hurricane. The other remittance transfer agencies confirmed similar patterns. With a population of approximately 250,000, not counting the semi-rural surrounding areas, it is doubtful that the majority of families in Gonaïves receive remittances of any consequence through formal transfer channels.

In all but one of the focus groups, the majority claimed to receive no assistance from relatives based in Canada, the US or elsewhere, and those who did receive remittances maintained that the amounts were insignificant. Some of the assistance workers accompanying the project were persuaded that the informants were not being candid about the funds they received. This may well be the case. It is understandable that people do not wish to talk about their sources of income in a group setting. Nevertheless, in individual interviews where greater confidence was established and where people agreed to talk specifically about remittances, informants described receiving only small amounts of money or goods and elaborated on the difficulties their relatives faced in sending anything at all. They also affirmed that theirs was the common situation. Among the poorer sectors interviewed, all characterised their overseas relatives as poorly paid, often lacking legal status or authorisation to work in the countries to which they had gone, and saddled with many family responsibilities. A very small number of interviewees confirmed that they received sufficient remittances on a regular basis to constitute livelihood support.

The amounts and mechanisms of remittance transfers to people in Gonaïves—or other places in Haiti—are complex and hard to quantify:

- Transfer agency clients typically use different enterprises at different times depending on the kinds of services they or their overseas relatives need.

<sup>7</sup> CAM is the largest of the transfer agencies working in Gonaïves, followed by UniBank. Bobby Express (the third largest) and Western Union are also present in Gonaïves, but were not interviewed.

- In addition to remittances channelled through transfer agencies or banks, an unknown but large amount is carried by 'mailmen' (*facteurs*), who are paid to make deliveries. Individuals who travel overseas are expected to bring back remittance money or goods as a favour for friends and family. Among those working for international agencies, nearly all have fulfilled the latter service when they have travelled.
- Both business executives buying or sending goods from overseas and individual families sending non-cash remittances use transfer agencies to deliver the goods. Business executives who travel carry cash as well as large quantities of merchandise for individuals and families as a matter of course, and receive payment for the service.
- Likewise, business executives accept commissions from individuals overseas to include in their commercial orders some items meant for individuals or families. Haitians with shops or commercial enterprises regularly ship packages of goods by container, ranging from food to computers, destined for private parties.

Non-cash remittances are very important to Haitian recipients. A

high cost of living plagues Haiti, due largely to the fact that so little is produced in the country and what is manufactured is poorly distributed.<sup>8</sup> Nearly everything is imported and sold at high prices. Hence, it is reportedly less costly to ship common items needed on a daily basis, such as clothing, oil, rice, salt, shoes and spaghetti, than to buy them in Haiti. Remittance transfer agencies have commercial affiliates and/or stores in communities with strong migrant populations and own other shops in Haiti, so that goods are moved efficiently. Live animals are an important component of remittance transfers, especially at holiday time.<sup>9</sup>

As will be shown below, during and following Jeanne, non-cash items were prevalent and highly valued.

<sup>8</sup> A June 2004 report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) cited UN OCHA and CARE studies confirming high prices for basic commodities, due to political instability and theft (USAID, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> According to Barbabe Ndarishikanye, CAM and Bobby Express annually ship goods worth approximately USD 2 million between Canada and Haiti (Ndarishikanye, B., 2005, p. 148). The popular practice of sending live animals to Haitian relatives at Christmas is described in Millman and Chozick, 2005.



## Chapter 3

# Cyclone Jeanne: the first phase

The hurricane caused incalculable losses in relation to lives and property and for at least two months, the population was in dire need. Many slept on their roof or on that of their neighbour, or crowded together in the few buildings left relatively intact. Immediately after the storm, the CARE office, which was on higher ground than most buildings, became home to some 600 people.<sup>10</sup> On 5 October, CARE President Peter Bell reported that 400 people remained at this relatively protected and well-stocked compound—many stayed for as long as two months. A private secondary school, also situated on high enough ground largely to escape damage, took in 1,200 people—school students, school staff and their families and people from the surrounding area—and maintained this ‘refuge’ for 23 days. Intact churches and public buildings also sheltered thousands of flood victims. Until people were able return to their homes, they had to be fed and clothed and provided with sanitation facilities. International relief funds allowed these needs to be met. All of the neighbourhood groups reported several people who had lost their homes entirely and had left Gonaïves to return to their place of origin or to live with family members elsewhere. Reportedly, only a few have returned.

Once the water receded, city residents had to find a way of removing the mud and debris that filled their houses and replacing the contents of their homes, which had been ruined beyond use. Very few earned an income during this time, as markets, offices, schools and services were no longer functioning. Numerous families, therefore, lacked the money to make their homes habitable.

Public services in the city also were slow to return. An American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) report of November 2004, written two months after the disaster, noted that major roads were still impassable and standing water was everywhere (AFSC, 2004). At that time, Gonaïves government officials told the AFSC that three million cubic metres of mud and rubbish still filled the streets. (At the time of writing (January 2006), city streets are clear, but an ‘artificial lake’ still transects the national highway leading into the city.)

With communication systems not working, the affected population could not reach family members outside of Gonaïves, or even check on loved ones within the affected area. Relatives ready to help, including those outside of the country, had no way of knowing what had happened or what was needed. Landlines were down for about three months. Haitian telephone companies worked around the clock and after a few days were able to restore limited telephone and internet services to major clients and a few institutions. Otherwise, individuals with working mobile telephones left the city as soon

as they could and walked several kilometres to reach the nearest town where there was electricity and reception. A stream of people made the journey and placed repeated calls to their own family members and to those of friends and neighbours. The aforementioned school where students had taken refuge was one of the institutions to regain internet access after approximately three days. The schoolchildren were given 10 minutes each to send e-mails, at a charge of two US dollars. Gonaïves residents with access to communications called or e-mailed everywhere looking for help, including Cap-Haïtien, Jacmel and Port-au-Prince, as well as Miami, Montreal, New York and Paris. If they reached one relative, he/she was told to contact others near and far. They supplied family news, recounted personal and material losses, and asked for money and goods. They made arrangements for the delivery of remittance money and goods to locations outside of Gonaïves. Interviewees reported travelling to other cities where family and friends took them in until the items arrived.

Communication was especially difficult for people living in rural areas where isolation was more pronounced. Farmers who grew crops and raised animals were less likely than urban dwellers to have access to mobile telephones; with all other forms of communication damaged by the storm, they could not call for outside help when the floods came.

People in the rural communities waited longer than those in town for the roads surrounding their land to become passable enough for relief to be delivered. Donors and relief agencies eventually opened roads and brought food, water and other basic essentials. They did little in the early stage to repair damage to land or to replace farm animals. Facing ruin, the people in the rural areas around Gonaïves began leaving in large numbers, and have been doing so increasingly ever since. Before the hurricane, however, this area was one of the most fertile in Haiti and was reasonably prosperous. According to informants, few had wished to leave their land prior to Jeanne. Ironically, the fact that these small landowners had been relatively well off and therefore contributed less to migration than most of the country meant that they had a smaller pool of outside family resources to draw on when disaster struck.

At the time of the hurricane, people working in Gonaïves and supporting relations in their place of origin or elsewhere had to turn to these same relatives for help. Many victims of the hurricane returned to the places they had left, because they no longer could support themselves, much less others, in Gonaïves. A few families interviewed had sent their children to live with relatives and to go to school in other Caribbean nations, but due to the hurricane, they could no longer support them. One informant’s daughter in school in the Bahamas withdrew money for her living expenses to send to her parents

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jouthe Joseph, CARE Director, Gonaïves.

in Haiti. The family with which she was living continued to take care of her, although they could not expect any contributions from her now impoverished parents. Hence, the suffering the storm inflicted on the population of Gonaïves was augmented by a loss of income in the surrounding region.

Family members throughout Haiti drew on their own resources and channelled remittances to relatives in Gonaïves. Hundreds made their way there, bearing what they could to ease the suffering. Cash was most useful, but it was hard to find goods to buy. People tried to carry essential clothing, food and household goods. In one sad case, a woman recounted how her sister spent days on the road carrying badly needed food items, only to find there was no charcoal to cook the food. The family set burned one of the few undamaged chairs and cooked the food over the fire.

Staff working in the remittance transfer agencies in Gonaïves experienced similar deprivation as the rest of the population. The managers interviewed asserted with pride the lengths they, their local staff and the central offices had gone to facilitate communication between victims and their relatives overseas, and to arrange for cash and in-kind deliveries to be made to locations outside of Gonaïves. They reported leaving their own flooded homes in order to open their still partially flooded offices within three days and, with the help of local telephone companies, to restore internet links. (Normal telephone and electronic communications were re-established after three months.)

With the collaboration of the central offices in Port au Prince, remittance transfer agencies arranged for payments bound for Gonaïves to be sent to the capital or another city. Because banks in Gonaïves could not receive wire transfers, considerable sums of money were transported by air or other means into the city and then delivered by hand. Some of the would-be recipients of the payments could not be found, either because they had perished in the storm or because their homes were gone. A remittance agency official described a typical case of trying to deliver by hand cash that he had received from his office in Port au Prince to a house in Gonaïves that had been destroyed. He learned from neighbours that the recipient had gone to Port au Prince. With their help, the agency tracked down the individual and the Port au Prince office delivered the money. Another enterprise told clients to make their way (by foot, presumably) to the nearest town a few kilometres away, where managers had rented buses to pick them up and take them to a larger community some 40 kilometres away. There, they made free telephone calls and arranged for money transfers to be sent. All of the remittance companies cut transfer fees wholly or

partly after the storm, restoring them approximately one month later. Recipients of remittances were not necessarily impressed by these efforts, but did acknowledge that the remittance agency staff had been willing to bend the rules in their favour.

The research for this review did not encompass a systematic assessment of the work of the international community in bringing relief to the victims of Jeanne. It is fair to say, though, that there was a strong international response immediately after the hurricane, which inevitably fell far short of meeting needs. Donor governments released emergency funds and within a few days, several hundred missions from all over the world were on the scene. Funding was made available for disaster reconstruction undertaken by agencies based in Asia, Europe and the US. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) cleaned, repaired and rebuilt some 50 schools and distributed educational material (UNICEF, 2004). The World Food Program (WFP), working through CARE, distributed 6,200 metric tons of food (WFP, 2005). The largest NGOs to act during the first month were CARE (which already had a large programme based in Gonaïves), Oxfam, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Other agencies soon followed: Action Against Hunger; the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF); the Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF) International; the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC); and multiple small, often church-based, entities. CARE targeted its large stocks of food and other material at hurricane relief; Oxfam mounted airlifts, transporting tons of potable water and sanitation equipment, enough water for 20,000 people per day (Oxfam, 2004); the other agencies supplied emergency relief and health care. The Artibonite Department government worked with them and tried to coordinate the assistance effort.

Physical problems concerning access combined with continuing violence exacerbated by the ouster of Aristide and an entirely ineffective local police force hindered outside help. Not only did humanitarian agencies need the protection of armed MINUSTAH troops to access the stocks in their Port au Prince warehouses, but rampant insecurity made road travel between the capital and Gonaïves hazardous. MINUSTAH peacekeepers said that several Gonaïves neighbourhoods were too dangerous for food distributions, and accompanied the dissemination teams to most locations. The recently installed Haitian transitional government left virtually the entire response to the hurricane to international agencies, relying on external support and private resources.

## Chapter 4

# Cyclone Jeanne: the aftermath

Between the September storm and the end of November, CARE received funds to undertake massive food distribution throughout the city and rural areas. Thereafter, the food distribution was targeted at vulnerable groups: families that had lost the breadwinner; families that had lost their homes; women-headed households; and families with more than five children. The targeted initiative covered more than 17,000 families, whereas prior to the hurricane the caseload had been about 1,000 families.<sup>11</sup> The figure has yet to return to pre-Jeanne levels, because of higher unemployment, higher prices and consequently, more malnutrition.

The majority of people interviewed, whether richer or poorer, reported that they had not yet been able to repair their homes adequately; they were still replacing lost furniture and other property one piece at a time. Moreover, since they have not been able to recover lost commercial or private property or to replace vehicles, farm animals and other structural inputs that were essential to their prior economic activity, many have lost the ability to earn the incomes that previously paid for health care and kept their children in school. In the past, those who received remittances from abroad were likely to use them to meet school and health expenses or to buy merchandise or tools for an income-generating activity. Following the hurricane, they had to use the resources that came their way to make repairs, replace items and buy basic goods for their families. For those now able to work and earn an income, remittances are used as before. For the many informants who complained that they presently earn a fraction of what they had done before, or nothing at all, outside remittances and help from extended family inside the country constitute their primary means of survival.

Within three months to one year, the majority of the international relief agencies left Gonaïves. That period saw a string of hurricanes that left victims all over the Caribbean and stretched relief resources. Without doubt, the 24 December 2004 tsunami in South Asia drew international resources from the Haitian disaster.

While the assistance received from international agencies and NGOs addressed the major initial needs of a large number of Haitian victims, funding for assistance projects was withdrawn before they reached large portions of the beneficiary population. Some families received a new roof from CHF or another agency, while others did not; some families could send their children back to repaired or rebuilt schools, but no international agency was available to reconstruct other schools. Various agencies and governments furnished seeds and tools for agricultural areas, but a formerly productive agricultural community visited by this interviewer some 15 months after the

storm, received only a fraction of what was required. In another, similar community, residents were still seeking outside help to repair the damaged water system and to restore latrines.

Despite international responses and the important interventions of a number of NGOs and international agencies, the affected parties have had to meet a large proportion of the repair and recovery costs. These costs, already noted, include first removing mud, then replacing lost clothing and satisfying other basic needs, repairing damage to walls, roofs and windows, and, finally, replacing tools, vehicles and animals. Simply to remove the mud requires hiring teams with special equipment, and paying from USD 20 (for a one-room dwelling) to hundreds of US dollars depending on the size of the house. These expenses came at a time when most people were receiving no income. Not surprisingly, the infrastructure damage to water and irrigation systems, latrines and access roads that relief agencies did not repair soon after the hurricane, has, for the most part, not been addressed to date.<sup>12</sup>

Remittance money eased the burden of paying for recovery necessities, but the grateful recipients faced difficult choices. For example, a woman whose Miami-based relatives usually sent USD 50 in remittances once or twice a year, received only an extra USD 10 after the hurricane. In normal times, the woman, who earned a small income herself by raising animals, would use the USD 50 to buy food. Because of the hurricane, she had to use the cash to purchase straw to replace the roof on her house. The hurricane, moreover, claimed the lives of the animals, so she lost income from that source. 'I ate badly this year', she said.

In an interview with 10 secondary-school students currently attending a private institution, the majority said that remittances were responsible for the payment of their fees. According to the students, these remittances are primarily from uncles and aunts in Canada and the US. Their parents, still in Haiti, earn far too little to afford to keep them in school. At the time of the hurricane, the relatives who were supporting them sent extra money for the families. One girl, though, reported that her parents confronted a dilemma because the amount sent was not sufficient to repair their badly damaged home and to cover school fees. Thus, they postponed the repairs. Others in the room nodded in agreement, indicating that their families faced similar choices.

In the poorer communities, and especially in the rural farming areas, school attendance fell after the storm, and families

<sup>11</sup> Interview with CARE representatives, Gonaïves, 10 January 2006.

<sup>12</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was reportedly considering repairing the irrigation system in the agricultural community of La Brande, but at best, the FAO repairs will be unable to cover over a 100 of the farmers in the community.

reported that their children still could not return to school. Some local primary schools have not been rebuilt, and many families do not have the money to pay for appropriate clothing or supplies, much less to send their children to schools located further away. Most of the secondary schools of which Gonaives is proud are privately operated. When the private schools reopened after the storm, they had fewer students.

The prices of basic goods rose following the hurricane, and consumption levels fell. More than 97 per cent of respondents in an Oxfam survey conducted in early 2005 indicated that business (commerce) had diminished in Gonaives since Jeanne, and more than 98 per cent asserted that basic goods had become expensive or very expensive. Merchants, who had to pay more than before for the stocks they had lost, had fewer customers. They therefore raised prices further in an attempt to make ends meet (Oxfam, 2005, pp. 3–4). When asked about the cause of the decline in business activity, 80 per cent pointed to a general lack of cash in the economy. Thirteen per cent blamed the storm directly, but close to 64 per cent traced the rising prices to the time of Jeanne (Oxfam, 2005, pp. 5–6, 11). The report calculated that reliance on commercial activity as a means of earning income fell by 34 per cent, and dependence on agriculture declined by 46 per cent. By contrast, the proportion of the population of Gonaives relying on donations from relatives and others rose by 156 per cent: from 12.5 to 31.7 per cent (Oxfam, 2005, p. 11).

One cannot underestimate the impact of lost livelihoods. For at least three months, most employees were without jobs and consequently without income. Slowly, commerce has recovered, and salaried employment has resumed, but the economy of Gonaives overall is fragile and wages are very low. A number of interviewees who previously had full-time occupations say that now, they are able to find only part-time or piecemeal work. It appears, moreover, that women are suffering the greatest hardship.

The major source of income in Gonaives city is commercial activity, primarily by small establishments selling household items or food. Predominantly, women run these enterprises. Female-headed households survive on buying and selling; men who are artisans, farmers or construction workers have wives who run a small shop or a food stall and supplement the family income. Repeatedly, the interviewees identified the loss of commercial goods and property as the major impediment to recovery. CARE, CHF and PADF briefly operated a small asset restoration project that replaced commercial goods lost in the flood and gave women credit to buy new items. By their own account, the project was short-lived and its beneficiaries relatively few. Other NGOs not interviewed apparently engaged in similar small-scale activities, but buying replacement goods and rebuilding shops and stalls was not a key donor priority after the storm. Now with most international agencies gone or on the verge of departing, it is highly unlikely that much more help of this nature will be forthcoming. The women interviewed reported making efforts to salvage business by buying a few items at a time, selling these at a small profit, and purchasing a

little more. They do not consider themselves to have recovered their prior income-generating capacity. In a few cases, however, even small remittances from relatives provided soon after the hurricane have made a critical difference. For example, the Canada-based handicapped sister of a woman sent garments that she could sell after the hurricane destroyed her shop. With the money, she could repair the shop.

Women in rural areas and some on the outskirts of town reported having earned money by raising pigs, goats or other small animals. Few of the animals survived and women who were formerly self-sufficient now are destitute. One example is the aforementioned woman who received USD 50 per year a year in remittances. The pittance she got was of less importance while she had animals to rear and sell. Now, she has little else. In rural areas, the women who raised animals not only had income of their own, but also they participated in community cooperatives as paying members. These cooperatives are decision-making bodies for the communities and serve to organise collective projects, such as the repair of irrigation canals and the construction of latrines. Unable to pay the fees for the cooperatives, such women have lost benefits and a voice in community affairs. The researcher was told that many women heads of families and some women with intact families who used to raise animals are now moving to the cities to work as maids. Similarly, men who owned land ruined by the storm are now employed as labourers.

In Haiti, as elsewhere, women are predominant among the beneficiaries of micro credit projects and have been exemplary in repaying their debts. Because of the hurricane, Fonkoze, a well-known transfer and micro credit operation, cancelled interest payments for September through December 2004, and granted new lines of credit.<sup>13</sup> Regular interest payments are now in effect. Although much commercial and agricultural property was never recovered, groups of women are seeking new forms of credit. Fonkoze officials believe these women to be remittance recipients.

An important and unfortunate consequence of the hurricane in Gonaives is outmigration of large numbers of residents. As already noted, city residents who had come to Gonaives from smaller towns in the region to work or attend school often returned to their place of origin when homes were lost and the means of earning a living disappeared. Opportunities for employment or education are poorer in the small towns than in Gonaives. Residents and former residents of Gonaives have joined in ever-growing numbers the massive influx of Haitians to the capital city, Port au Prince, a city already unable to provide jobs, security or services for its swollen population. And, more than ever, people from Gonaives, especially young people, try to leave the country.

Immigration and illegal entry to Canada and the US have become progressively more difficult. Informants reported that they considered this option to be impossible. They understood that if they successfully entered illegally, they might find

<sup>13</sup> Interview at Fonkoze, 8 January 2006.

themselves in economic conditions almost as bad as those in Haiti, with additional debts associated with their passage. The Bahamas and the Dominican Republic still attract Haitian migrants from Gonaives, most of whom reach these destinations illegally, and usually with disappointing outcomes. The young people, predominant among the migrants, rarely send money back or do so irregularly. Those with family still in Haiti reportedly do manage to send something, until they are able to join them.

The exodus from the once prosperous agricultural land that has ceased to support the population that lives there is especially troubling. As it stands, Haiti grows only a fraction of the food

that it consumes and exports are minimal. In the region visited, farmers were still growing fruit, rice and vegetables, but at levels far below those prior to the storm because of the loss of irrigation systems and other agricultural inputs. Rain has been scarce in 2005. NGO projects have helped, but not enough to rescue the land. As farmers now abandon the land and join the masses in the inhospitable cities of Haiti or become unwelcome migrants in the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic, not only do they lose out, but the country as a whole suffers. They will no longer be contributing to the Haitian economy as before; the country will need to import more food and will lose potential export income. Groups in three rural communities reported the largest exodus in their memory.





## Chapter 5

# Summary of findings: solidarity and assistance

The researcher was well received and people readily responded to her questions about what had happened to them during and after the hurricane, the means they had found to survive and the assistance they had received—or not received. They described the horrors they had endured and noted exactly the number of days that passed before they were able to contact family members. They recalled when CARE, Oxfam or the Red Cross had first appeared with some form of help. In addition, they spoke in detail of how they managed to communicate with relatives outside of Haiti. The majority who gathered for the discussion described assistance received in the wake of Jeanne from their neighbours, family members and friends in the country. They emphasised that Haiti was a country based on family and community solidarity in times of crisis. They recounted how their own family members had travelled from nearby towns and from Port au Prince to bring food, clothing and other types of assistance. However, as noted, and somewhat to the surprise of this researcher, they played down the significance of support from outside sources.

It appears that while family remittances from outside the country were critical to those who received them following the hurricane, large segments of the population did not and do not receive them, at least not directly. After the storm, though, nearly everyone received what may be called internal remittances, that is, material help from family members in Haiti. A large number among these internal sources undoubtedly benefited from remittances sent by migrant relatives. Money from Haitian migrants has poured in, but it continues to be spread very thin among an already poor and now destitute population.

The previously cited food security survey by Oxfam asked beleaguered urban traders about coping strategies: it found the primary method to be by far family support (Oxfam, 2005, p. 4). The impact of remittances from all sources must be examined in the context of Haitian family ties and survival strategies. A typical remittance payment of USD 100 per month (lower in Gonaïves than in the country overall) does not go far because of widespread, wrenching poverty, compounded by the high cost of living in Haiti. Nearly every person who receives money from overseas is responsible for several others. Most of the time, families share remittances. An individual in Port au Prince who gets remittances from Miami or Montreal will probably send a portion of the funds to other relatives. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that help reaching Gonaïves after the hurricane from relatives in Port au Prince (or elsewhere in Haiti) actually represented, in part, remittances sent to the latter from overseas. In the case of Gonaïves, which has a large number of people from other towns in the region, remittance recipients normally share whatever they earn or acquire among family members near and far. Nearly everyone interviewed did so to a greater or lesser extent. Alternatively, people who have settled

in Gonaïves in order to benefit from schools for their children may get help from other family members in their place of origin.

### The Haitian diaspora, as portrayed

The Haitian diaspora is large and generous. It includes significant numbers of professionals and persons of moderate to high level income, primarily in the US and Canada, and especially among those who have come as political refugees. Gonaïves, though, is a city with few economic resources, and the migrants it generates are likely to struggle to survive in their host country. Informants' stories are illustrative:<sup>14</sup>

- A man who had depended for his livelihood on buying and transporting small items for sale lost both his car and motorcycle in the storm, besides suffering damage to his home and losing personal property. He had a brother in the Bahamas who was only able to send some beans, cooking oil and rice immediately after the hurricane. Hoping to do better, the same brother moved to Miami illegally, but found himself in a worse situation and in 2005 sent nothing.
- A man whose mobile telephone still operated after the hurricane went to Port au Prince and called his sister in Miami to reassure her that he and his family had survived and to ask for help. While there, he rang the relatives of several of his neighbours in Canada and the US. These calls resulted in several remittance transfers, with which he purchased essential provisions to bring back to all. His sister also sent some money, but as she had a large family in Miami and a low paying job, the amount covered little more than his trip expenses.
- A young person of 17 left his semi-rural community and along with most people of his age, went to the Dominican Republic. Within a year, he was home. He reported in an interview that at best, he and the others were able to find part-time and occasional work at subsistence wages. The young people shared among themselves but had nothing to send back to their parents. He reported suffering the misfortune of being wrongly blamed for a robbery that resulted in an accidental death. He fled across the border to Haiti, and was unemployed at the time of the interview.
- A teacher whose house was destroyed received some assistance from relatives in Port au Prince and abroad. What she got paid only for a portion of the repairs. She was unable to reach her husband, in the United States, for over a week. He did not return to Gonaïves as arranged, because of the dire situation. He now sends her small amounts of money on a monthly basis.

Remittances flow in both directions and migration may be a cost rather than a benefit. As noted, informants are supporting children in schools outside of Haiti—Cuba has become a

<sup>14</sup> Interview at Fonkoze, 8 January 2006.

popular destination because the schools are of high quality and cost less than those situated elsewhere. Families reported using remittance funds to pay for other relatives to leave, and contributing to their livelihoods for some time after they arrived. Working adults frequently leave their children with extended family members in Haiti while they try to earn money overseas to send back. One of the informants claimed to have 17 children in his care: 12 from two cousins in the Bahamas and his own family of five. The cousins, who had not yet legalised their status, did not have regular jobs and had sent nothing for the children. He hoped they eventually would be able to do so. The informant supports the family through part-time jobs in construction and has not yet been able to repair much of the damage done to his house by Jeanne.

The aftermath of Jeanne has had a positive impact in terms of placing new attention on disaster management and disaster preparedness. Government officers, NGO staff and community members affirmed that they had learned lessons from the storm and had taken steps to avoid the kind of flooding caused by Jeanne. Infrastructure has been somewhat improved and committees have been established in most of the affected communities that are prepared to take the lead in future. The NGOs have undertaken a few, although not enough, training courses on disaster preparedness. Nevertheless, the continuing erosion of the hillsides and the fact that far too many poor Haitians burn trees for charcoal because that is their only source of income will exacerbate the effects of the next storm.

## Chapter 6

# Conclusion

The study findings lead to the conclusion that migrant remittances from outside Haiti were one element of what might be termed a 'chain of solidarity' among neighbours, relatives still in the country, international humanitarian agencies that came to the city to help, and overseas relatives. All links in this chain remain essential. The results strongly suggest that while remittances overall play an important role in the lives of individuals in Gonaives, they yield only small improvements in the quality of life and do not relieve poverty. Those interviewed for this study reported very small increments in the cash remittances they received post Jeanne, although they apparently received considerable in-kind transfers in the form of clothing, food and other necessities.<sup>15</sup> None of the informants cited the Haitian government as an important player in the relief or recovery effort, but some local officials apparently worked hard to complement and coordinate the activities of international agencies and NGOs working in Gonaives.

Some small steps that could have been taken to facilitate remittance flows, and should be considered in planning for future disasters, are listed below:

- Haitians, even poor Haitians, are used to communicating with relatives in distant places. As reported here, at the time of the storm, the ability to communicate with relatives had life-saving consequences. In this age of satellite telephones and sophisticated information technology, it seems reasonable to assume that relief agencies and international organisations could have made it easier to communicate in Gonaives. Remittances and other kinds of assistance that families can offer to victims of a disaster depend on the ability of both sides to exchange information.
- In view of the fact that families were essential components in the 'chain of solidarity' in Gonaives, donors and relief agencies could consider placing some resources (for example the non-cash donations that so often go undistributed) in the hands of those with relatives in the affected zones, and helping nearby family members to reach these zones. Although this cannot be orchestrated easily in the emergency

<sup>15</sup> US census data for 2000 puts the median earnings for males at USD 25,800, for females at 22,200, the poverty level among Haitians at 34 per cent, 34.4 per cent not in the labour force and 56.6 per cent who were not citizens. It is not correlated for place of origin or time spent in the US. The total population in 2000 was 419,315. It has grown over the past five years, and now probably includes a greater number of individuals fleeing economic misery.

phase, and would require some organised entity to work with families, it is worth consideration. This would not and should not diminish international relief or remove the spontaneous response of families to their relatives in the wake of disaster. It would, however, help to buttress poor families with only their own meagre resources to share.

- Many Haitians extended help to disaster victims via charitable organisations and churches. The process was spontaneous. There was little planning within the Haitian diaspora regarding the eventual use of the funds they collected. They were, of course, well aware of the multiple needs of their relatives and friends. They were not in a position, though, to ensure that their donations would be put to the best use. Donor governments and charitable bodies in Canada, France, the US and other countries with large Haitian populations could improve disaster response overall through closer collaboration with organised migrants who have pledged to supply relief to their homeland.

As underlined at several points in this report, funds channelled to help victims recover livelihoods are essential for recovery. The fact that neither remittances nor international humanitarian assistance was adequate for this purpose has destroyed the future prospects of countless families, and has left the nation as a whole even poorer.

Remittances are obviously not addressing the larger problems confronting Haiti. Nor can the remittance flows to Gonaives after the hurricane be credited with having stimulated recovery. Individual families received vital help from relatives, but the all too limited recovery that occurred is due primarily to international humanitarian assistance. The conditions that exacerbated the flooding and destruction in Gonaives remain and have got worse. The government is universally described as among the most corrupt in the world, and provides minimal services to its population. For instance, two major areas that receive remittance funds in non-disaster times are education and health care, services that should benefit from government input and not depend on such transfers. Haitian GDP at the close of 2003 was USD 361, with more than 65 per cent of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2004, p. 1). The years 2004 and 2005 have been characterised by political and economic crisis, pushing the population even deeper into poverty. The Haitian diaspora provides a lifeline to its compatriots, but it is too slender in normal times, and much less so in the face of a disaster.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Major assistance was received from the following:

**Oxfam UK** office in Haiti

**Yolette Etienne**, Program Coordinator, Haiti

**Luc St. Vil**, Livelihoods Project Officer

**Parnel Denis** Oxfam

**CARE** office in Haiti

**Jouthe Joseph**, CARE Office Administrator Gonaives office, CARE staff members **Eddy Joseph**, **Jean Gary Sanon**, **Erode Mondesir** and **Ronald Ledix** accompanied the research. Other members of the CARE Gonaives staff, **Herold Jean**, **Samuel Derivaouis** and **Boris Machand** assisted the work.

## Appendix 2

Sites of Focus Groups:

Parl Vincent (urban)

Andba Pwent (urban)

Bigot (urban)

Bois Marchand (rural)

Passe Reine (rural)

La Brande (rural)

### General questions on which interviews were based

#### On Hurricane Jeanne

1. Experiences
2. Assistance
3. Did families maintain contact with those outside Haiti?
4. Which groups were most badly affected?
5. Permanent changes, damages, improvements
6. How were goods meant for communities distributed?

#### On Migration

1. Extent of migration from the community/city
2. Sectors most likely to migrate (economic status, gender, age etc)
3. Where people usually went and why
4. Obstacles to migration
5. Migration as direct result of Jeanne or combined with other motives
6. Migration patterns since Jeanne
7. Covering costs of migration
8. How money for migration is raised
9. Changes over time.

#### On Remittances

1. How do the remittance transfer agencies operate? what services to they provide
2. What happened to people who had no family members outside the country?
3. Approximately what percent of people in the groups receive remittances from sources outside or inside the country?
4. How many family members send remittances on a regular basis?
5. What assistance came directly as a result of Jeanne? From where?
6. Apart from money, what did family members send during and after Jeanne?
7. How many other people are being supported by the informant?
8. How have remittances been used toward recovery from damage caused by Jeanne?
9. What are the major uses of remittances received at present?
10. Were remittances used specifically to fund out-migration of family members?
11. What are expectations regarding remittances from people who have left or are planning to leave?
12. What remittance transfer company does informant use and why?





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