

Christine Williamson Haiti blog – January - March 2010

My summary

Now back in the UK and finishing off the odd report, I realise this has been a very brief time in Haiti. It has been a privilege to work alongside the Haitian people and to be a small part of their recovery process. Tearfund hope to be in Haiti for many years; the Disaster Management Team are proposing to be there for 3-4 years with such a large amount of construction to do. My hope is that this blog gives you a small window into the life of a relief team and in particular HR. I won't say running operational HR in a disaster zone is easy, but it draws upon all the principles of HR you know and love in the corporate world. Relief work teaches you about the importance of flexibility, humility and you learn a lot about yourself. Set up looks quite different with each disaster. My advice is always to respect the locals and what they have been through, respect their culture and local practices and get legal. I have developed a snazzy spreadsheet which walks me through the systems I need. I'm hoping I can share it with others so their HR set ups can be systematic and provide a good foundation for programmes going forward.

This being my final post, I wanted to stress that should anyone reading this want more information on HR set up plans for Haiti or anywhere else then please do get in touch. My email address is Christine@peopleinaid.org.

People In Aid will continue to support NGOs in Haiti with their HR systems, policies and practices, by offering materials, training packages and consultancies and by working with other networks and organisations working in disaster response.

Thanks to CIPD for allowing me to share my experiences. I hope they have been of some interest! Thank you for reading.

Posted 12 March 2010 10:17 by Christine Williamson

Handing over

We haven't found a new HR Manager yet so I'm handing my 'work in progress' to different members of the team. My assistant, Alpha, will be taking on most of the work especially the recruitment (and all the administration from the last recruitment drive). On the bright side, we successfully recruited a new HR Officer, Charlie, who was available to start immediately (Monday 1st)! So I invited her to the HR Forum that was taking place in the afternoon so she could hear the general HR issues NGOs are grappling with plus meet lots of other HR bods. Charlie will eventually take over from Alpha at the end of April and coordinate HR from Port au Prince with the new HR Manager. We are also recruiting an HR Officer for our Leogane base, so hopefully HR support will be relevant to the programme's needs very soon. In the meantime, I'll be drafting the Staff Handbook from the UK for managers to use as a starting point for HR practice.

I was extremely pleased to have the employment contracts legally approved and translated before I left. Staff can now be formally recruited and receive a salary and benefits package comparable to other NGOs in Haiti. As far as policy and practice go, the next priority for HR is to introduce a medical scheme and implement the Staff Handbook. My understanding is – there are viable private medical schemes in Haiti which a lot of local organisations use.

The HR Forum's purpose is to bring NGOs together so we can share our HR practices and learn from each other. About 40 came to the meeting on the 1st of March and it is my hope the Forum will grow and continue on a monthly basis. The minutes from this meeting are on the One Response website - <http://oneresponse.info> (this site is a coordination website for the Haiti response where all the information

Is placed with regard to what is happening between the UN and other NGOs - local and international). I will be trying to answer the various questions I've received since the meeting, and will be on my [People In Aid](mailto:Christine@peopleinaid.org) email address (Christine@peopleinaid.org) from this week onwards if any one would like further information with regard to HR in Haiti.

Posted [10 March 2010 11:37](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Interviews

We managed to put an interview list together the day before the interviews took place – we listed all those who should come. You wouldn't do this in all circumstances by the way – the only reason we did this time was because there were other agencies also employing staff, bringing hope to those who weren't listed.

After some worry and concern about whether people would turn up (and a group sms to all those invited – just in case), everyone showed up, a miracle. We interviewed around 30 people and recruited 15. We will be doing a similar venture in 2 weeks looking for 25 people in 2 positions – so we will be interviewing around 40 people to do this. I'll be back in London then, hopefully watching [Tearfund](#) grow (from a distance!).

A very hospitable pastor allowed us to use his church to collect the CVs and do the interviewing. The church was in the middle of the town of [Leogane](#) which has been very much destroyed. There are piles of rubble everywhere, yet even in this broken down area we were surrounded by the buzz of a town – lots of people walking, on bikes, motor bikes, cars, 4by4s bouncing along the tracks (not really roads), latin music playing all day long (very loudly) close to our interview room (which was basically 4 walls with a tin roof), where we sat hour on hour chatting to the locals in [Creole](#), with a translator, about their skills and experiences. All have lost someone or something in the quake – a relative, a friend, their job. It's a very hard time for graduates in Haiti as they are now out of work with no work experience in an environment where a lot of qualified and experienced people have also lost their job due to a building no longer existing. I'm interviewing an HR Manager on Monday for an HR Officer role. You could say it's a good environment for a recruiter at the moment. The arrival of so many [INGOs](#) (and there's about 900), does bring jobs. My hope is – in 6 months time when the NGOs have settled in and are well underway with their projects, lots of local people will have jobs and have the opportunity to gain experiences they would not have been exposed to before. My hope is also that we should never have to come back here again because the Haitians will learn and have the capacity to respond to their own disasters. This is how it should be – we should only come en masse the once – to train and capacity build. We shouldn't need to come to Haiti like this again if we do our job right. A colleague asked me last night – so where will we go next? And my answer was – well it shouldn't be Haiti, Indonesia or any of the places we have spent time in before. I only of course can refer to natural disasters. Where there is conflict like in [Darfur](#) and [Congo](#), the forgotten crises, where man continues to fight with each other for various and complex reasons, then we will always be needed. We will always need to serve communities caught up in the cross fire, who have to flee for their lives to somewhere else. My God – how blessed we are living in the West.

The team in Leogane have now begun the tarp distributions. We had helicopters taking tonnes of tarps to the hills, trucks going between Leogane and Port au Prince – about 6 teams at different meeting points receiving the goods and then distributing them through community leaders and a very effective ticket system. They will be doing this for the next 2 days. The logistics of this kind of distribution had our Logs Manager, Tango, running around and travelling by road and air delivering the very needed waterproof (very temporary) shelters. Oh and by the way – it rained last night. It's rained before, but last night it rained heavily so the seasons are changing. People need shelter and the tarps cannot come at a better time. Also, our tents are getting a little damp so we will be looking at getting our team into accommodation very quickly now.....it's so easy to get into camping life when the weather is fine – and being British doesn't make you anymore resilient, trust me!

Posted [05 March 2010 11:32](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Planning staff structures

So we (2 vehicles) arrived at the temporary base where our Leogane team were camping. A very nice spot by all accounts in the grounds of a missionary group. The area is called Christianville - named by a group of missionaries some while back I believe. After having a coffee, pitching our tents (again) and familiarising ourselves with the utilities, we started to think about how we were going to recruit. We popped over to the New Missions church (where we'd been sending people with their CVs) and picked up two very large boxes of orange envelopes – the vacancy notices and radio advertising worked!

We brought along our 2 translators Romeo & Juliet (ironically) from Port au Prince to help us go through the CVs – so for 5 hours we were going through CVs, in a beautiful setting surrounded by mountains, dogs and extremely large spiders. It gets dark around 6/6.30 so we finished the task with our head torches fighting off the mozzies. It's amazing when 7 or 8 of you are together you can turn a large task into fun – so we did, and spending time with Romeo, Juliet and our other national staff was great. If you want to know how administrative HR is – do it outside with the wind blowing. We had about 20 piles of paper blowing around – orange envelopes everywhere.

Mike & Alpha, our Education and Water and Sanitation Advisors, have designed the project and the staffing structures based on their experiences in Darfur and Congo – so we knew the kind of people we were looking for and where we would like them to come from. We were keen to recruit staff from the communities we would be working in, although we realise that some of the senior roles may need to be recruited from Port au Prince and then relocated (we call these nationals rather than locals) – which brings a set of benefits which a local recruit wouldn't receive, such as accommodation, food and home leave. This package was very similar to the system I used in Indonesia post the Asian earthquake/tsunami.

Posted 02 March 2010 17:29 by Christine Williamson

Distribution of aid

Next week it's going to be crazy – we have been given 7,100 items to distribute to the areas where we made an assessment. We are setting up base, recruiting 50+ people, setting up another base and doing another round of recruitment. We've just spent an hour trying to figure out who needs to be where when.....so 5 vehicles, 3 trucks and 30+ staff later we've sorted it. We were also asked to find 10 more staff for Monday (minor request in the scheme of things) to help pack the trucks with the tarps – the tarps by the way are the waterproof emergency shelters (the next step with shelter improvements) which we have agreed to distribute within 7 days – extremely important for the community with the rains coming (and happening a few times a week now) and the very reason we're here.

From an HR perspective - can you imagine the number of contracts, personnel files and briefings that need to take place next week – I'm writing this for my assistants behalf too – another Alpha – really glad you're here by the way!? On top of all this we have our 2 managers from Tearfund coming out (both old friends thank goodness), who I'm sure will willingly join in with the fun and drama of questionable living conditions, no sleep and a tremendous lot of work – it could be diabolical or it could be a miracle (or both) – but I know we'll do it.

We had our very own NGO coordination meeting this week, hosted by ICVA (*International Council of Voluntary Agencies*) at the chapel in our compound. It was a start – lots to organise and pull together but well needed. We discussed bridging the gap with the local and international NGOs, sharing information, issues and learning from each other. There are about 900 new organisations that have arrived as a result of the quake so coordination has become one of the biggest areas to get a handle on.

I'm meeting with RedR and HAP (*Humanitarian Accountability Partnership*) tomorrow lunch (hopefully

somewhere nice) to discuss training needs amongst NGOs and to see how [People In Aid](#) can be involved. I'm hoping my boss (who I left in London for this assignment), will be extremely pleased especially as he's been covering my work for the past month!

Posted [26 February 2010 16:26](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Taking to the airwaves

I went to Leogane on Thursday to [advertise](#) for our 50 vacancies. Once I arrived I met with a church contact, Golf, who will take on the role of pinning up lots of adverts around the 3 regions (Gressier, Leogane & in the hills), giving out application forms and receiving them at his church. We don't have a base at the moment so I'm relying on help through informal contacts. I spent some time roaming around Leogane showing Golf where to pin adverts. Leogane has been severely affected by the [quake](#). The streets are much smaller than in Port au Prince and houses have not just crumbled but completely collapsed, everywhere.

It was suggested that the radio was also a great way to advertise posts – so I asked to be taken to the radio station by my driver, Alpha, and Golf. As it happened, the radio station was called Cool FM and operating from the street and a broken table. We asked if we could advertise and after a few minutes of discussing who we were and what we were trying to do – with several radio people who seemed to come out of no where – we got a spot. Alpha, my driver, took the lead in [Creole](#) – and spent 20 mins promoting [Tearfund](#) (this is all recorded on my camera). He was fabulous. They interviewed us all (even me with my south west London accent), and promised to keep promoting us every day - yikes. Whilst we were on the radio we could hear ourselves echoing around the area, even motorbikes passing by had it on! People came to ask about jobs whilst we were still advertising – so hopefully my recruitment drive next week will reap some rewards – I will only regret (and I say this ahead of time) that I won't be able to give everyone a job. So a big thanks to Alpha and Golf for their commitment, fun and support to get this project off the ground!

Oh and Golf has just called - he's already handed out the 150 forms we'd given him plus the extras he'd photocopied. Roll on [short-listing](#).

Posted [24 February 2010 16:38](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Project plans following the assessment

So the assessment team are back with stories of walking through the bush for hours on some days before coming into contact with members of communities. There are very desperate stories of people still without shelter. One story – a woman gave birth during the quake and is now sleeping beside the road with her new born under a sheet.

As a result of this assessment we are now preparing to start our projects in the [Leogane area](#) – which is located close to the epicentre of the quake (and severely affected). Today I put together a project plan and somehow need to find about 50 Health and WatSan (Water and Sanitation) staff in the next 8-14 days. So I will be travelling to Leogane this week (it's about a 2.5 hr drive) to try and source good staff. This has logistical challenges – we don't have an office in Leogane (yet) and there is little internet access - so using the Haiti recruitment website [Jobpaw](#) will not be that helpful in [finding local staff](#), and we want locals!. I shall start this process by calling those INGOs (International Non Governmental Organisations) already there and visiting colleges and places like churches to advertise our jobs and collect applications on our behalf. Once this is in place, it gives me some breathing space to recruit the local managers from [Port au Prince](#) for the project. They in turn will help to recruit the 50 remaining staff we need to start the projects in the Leogane area – the lower (gracier) and upper areas.

In my [People In Aid](#) capacity I met with the representatives of [Sphere](#) and [HAP](#) (quality and accountability bodies) and [ICVA](#) (International Council of Voluntary Agencies – who want to bring about a coordinating body for NGOs in Haiti - replicating the model in [Juba](#), [Khartoum](#) and other places). We've tentatively booked the chapel on our compound to host this, this week. The exciting thing from my perspective – this will a great place to share good practice and cover the issues we're facing for those areas where 'clusters' (see previous blog) are not happening. There is a hope that local NGOs will also come to the meeting, which is something [Tearfund](#) also feels strongly about as we have local partners ourselves. Local NGOs can often feel they don't have a voice when such a large INGO community suddenly arrive (and in some ways take over!). There are a lot of new INGOs here and we all need to register and get legally compliant with [Haitian employment law](#) amongst other things – but like most governing bodies in Haiti, the registering department has also been severely affected by the quake and have no building from which to operate.

Posted [17 February 2010 15:24](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Recruitment from under a tree...

My assistant arrived just over a week ago, so I feel a little relieved and free to do a couple more things like, well, shop! Food shopping is a very important task for the team. We don't have a fridge (and the temperatures sit around 32-35 degrees with close to 80% humidity), so what to buy and when to do it has become quite a challenge. I'm pleased to say, today, I found [corned beef](#) and [Dairylea](#) (well the equivalent of – any expat will tell you it's called [Laughing Cow](#)). I even bought some ice for the first time – which combined with those well known fizzy drinks, made for a nice respite from the heat – very needed. Our office space reaches desert temperatures, so I pack up and leave by 6pm. The heat is also playing havoc with our electrical kit – internet, laptops etc. I realise the UK is pretty chilly right now but would do anything to roll around in that snow that was sitting on my doorstep 3 weeks ago!

We've done our first round of [recruitment](#) and spent some time running assessments with 20-30 people. Thankfully Lima was around to help me so it went rather smoothly. Everyone sat on a wall and completed an assessment – whereby I had another team standing by to mark them and then move the successfuls to the next round – the interviewing. Recruitment is always much more fun when done under a tree with cows roaming around and the odd helicopter flying extremely low overhead. It went very smoothly considering the numbers and the fact that everyone really wanted and very much needed a job.

I work with a fantastic team. Everyone is doing their utmost to do their job well and all know their role really well – so it's great to be a part of this team even though it is only for 6 weeks. A normal week will see the team quite dispersed, for instance last week - Alpha and Mike took an assessment team to [Leogane](#) - where they journeyed though a designated region (mostly on foot or by donkey), meeting up and chatting with the smaller communities in order to identify their needs for possible projects. November came across a [tarantula](#) on the same trip, so I'm quite happy to be based in our church compound nearer to the city where we seem to be lacking in things that crawl and slither (and give nasty bites)!

Charlie and Delta also left to meet the needs assessment team in Leogane last week and to attend cluster meetings. They'll be back in a few days, with a sun tan and too much dust in their hair.

Posted [15 February 2010 11:59](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

Leaving the compound

I left the compound this week, for the first time in 9 days – I hadn't realised how blinkered you can become when all you see is tents and laptops. We drove up [Delmars](#), (an A road), and the devastation hit me again. My driver, Juliet, was about to go and get his hair cut at a hairdressers on Delmars when the earthquake struck. He pointed to this rubble on the ground and said he watched it fall. He was nearly

in the building.....we sighed, I took a photo and we moved on. The university further on has opened up its grounds to the community and it's now a tent city. There are many more new tents around than there were 2 weeks ago, and he tells me there are separate larger tents being erected solely for sanitation. People are building their own shelters and he tells me they are fearful of the rainy season, which in theory starts in April, but we have had some rain in some parts of Haiti already. You could say, the second biggest disaster after losing relatives, friends and homes is that people don't have a safe place to sleep, wash, eat or go to the toilet.

Ok – so back to the professional stuff. I've been busying myself in the compound and focusing on managing some of the local staff in the base, recruitment and developing processes like recruitment request forms, timesheets and job descriptions. The team are extremely busy and now we have a lawyer and translator I can get on with the registration process, developing employment contracts and medical schemes to reduce as much risk as possible to Tearfund and the staff. I'm still finding out about local practices and what other INGOs are doing.....and it's sometimes through misfortune you learn more about where things are and how things work.

My team know I'm writing this blog and have agreed that I can mention their names but phonetically – i.e. our initials should represent our call signs – so for example mine is Charlie! Tango, however, got a little sick last week (we think from the heat) and as a result I now know where a good doctor is – well a gynaecologist anyway (always useful in an emergency!). He's up and about and doing rather well now by the way!

Posted 12 February 2010 14:40 by Christine Williamson

HR systems and the recovery process

Well, what's going on then? On a personal level, our base has been set up really well and we have been so blessed to be able to park in a church compound and use office space in the church building. We're all in separate tents and even have 2 showers! I've not slept very well since I got here – I think last night was the first night I managed to nap a little. It's the hard floor and noisy birds and the odd gun shot, plus the stress I guess – the generator goes on at 6am and then there's a scurry for the showers. We have the capability to make fresh coffee every morning so all is well.....and we feel safe here (just in case Mum reads this!)

Re work – well, it's very busy for the team - the project team are out every day working in the communities giving very much needed health and child protection messages coupled with surveying the areas to decide which areas to run our projects. We already had an office here when the quake struck and our most senior staff member lost his home and office. It has been a priority to find alternative accommodation for him. The partners that Tearfund work with also lost so much and have been trying to get back on their feet in order to help the communities get back on theirs. This is the story of the recovery process. On the surface, I continue to be impressed by the Haitians resilience to what has happened. But I know underneath there is an awful lot of trauma and grief that so many will be dealing with for a long time. I'm pleased to say this has not been underestimated – there are a lot of counsellors making themselves available and teams are being set up to support those affected including the aid workers themselves.

I've been to the On-Site Operations Coordination Centre (UN) compound mostly to glean information and contacts in order to build some decent HR systems. Interestingly there is a 'cluster' for pretty much every sector (there's about 6 cluster meetings a day – shelter, water and sanitation, logistics, child protection, child friendly spaces, health etc) except there isn't one for HR! So after a little hunting around (and an email from People In Aid), I found out one NGO had had the initiative to call the HR bods together for a meeting yesterday – which was very much needed. It was good to meet other HR peers and understand the issues they are facing. I realised that most in the room would be leaving in the next couple of weeks so as time goes on lots of new faces will arrive – the second wave! A lot of the people in the room are in

organisations that were here before the quake so I've been pretty lucky being able to tap into this wealth of knowledge so I can produce things like salary scales, [terms and conditions](#) and staff handbooks for the Haitian staff we hope to hire.

I've been spending these last few days recruiting assessment teams and domestic staff for our base camp. I'm pleased to say we have a wonderful cook who I'm sure would love to cook us more [Creole food](#) if we only had the facilities. The recruitment requests from our project staff are starting to come in and I expect I will be spending most of my time next week sourcing people as well as writing [policy and systems](#).

My assistant is unfortunately still in San Domingo (Dominican Republic), waiting for flights and people to arrive, and hopefully will get to us by Friday with 2 more people including the Director from HQ. It's always great to have new people arrive.

Posted [04 February 2010 18:19](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)

[Arriving in Haiti](#)

I arrived in the Dominican Republic on Tuesday along with other members of the team with 25 large bags in tow, including tents, laptops, food and more from [Tearfund's](#) offices in Teddington, UK.

The drive yesterday from [San Domingo, Dominican Republic](#) into [Port-au-Prince, Haiti](#) took eight hours. Although it is too early for us to fully realise the devastation from the [earthquake](#), the surrounding poverty is clear with makeshift camps lining the road in.

Getting communications set up was an obvious priority and emails and mobile phones are both now working. Everyone has been really accommodating at the campsite. There are ten of us here with Tearfund and the compound is shared with two other charities as well as around 150 people who sleep under the trees.

HR and people priorities will become clearer over the coming days, owing to the amount that needs to be done. Today we are assessing sites we may be able to work in. People have already approached us asking for work and interviews are in the process of being set up. More on which in the next post. In the meantime, later on today we are interviewing for our cook and translator.

After our first night, team morale is good despite a few very small earthquake tremors this morning.

Posted [28 January 2010 17:07](#) by [Christine Williamson](#)