



Experience sheet

L'ATELIER

de la TRANSFORMATION SOCIALE

A Haitian experience of collective and citizen actions for the protection of the environment

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Citizens' committees: an innovative formula for collective action to protect the environment through citizen involvement



The citizens' committees aim to build actions to protect their environments in a sustainable way. The central issue is twofold: social and environmental. The aim is to **encourage social links between actors** who are not necessarily used to working together, while implementing **concrete actions** for their communities to safeguard the environment.

The idea behind this approach is that it is necessary to strengthen the social fabric in the long term in order to make it possible to act together and take collective responsibility. This makes all the more sense in a society like Haiti, where the strong economic difficulties of each individual tend to discourage people from joining collective dynamics.

The MPP, Frères des Hommes (FDH) and the Gradimirh have decided, within the framework of the RANFO LAVI PEYIZAN project, to give themselves the means to **experiment with original approaches to encourage and accompany**

environmental protection actions, with the participation of the actors at the heart of any action. These are citizen committees set up according to the methodology of Change Oriented Approaches (COA); 7 local citizen committees with the objective of carrying out environmental protection actions in a self-managed but supported (methodologically or financially) way.

When we started, the challenges were many:

Logistical/human resource challenges:

- 1) How to build a method to deploy the WCA approach in large territories where the socio-economic realities were not fully understood
- 2) How to set up 7 citizen committees simultaneously when you are a team of two people?

Methodological challenges :

- 3) How to mobilise groups of actors and individuals who are not used to working together?
- 4) How can we support groups of actors in imagining and rapidly building environmental actions adapted to their environment?
- 5) How to support and maintain regular volunteer citizen mobilisation around an issue (environment) that is not a public priority?

A citizens' committee: what is it? Who is it made up of?

Composition:

Composed of nine to eighteen people, these committees bring together people from different socio-professional backgrounds (teachers, peasants, students, school dropouts, non-literate people), who have different socio-economic powers and various affiliations (religious, political). Like the rural Haitian world today, the citizen committee is a small, plural society.

Seven citizens' committees were set up in two communes (Hinche and Mirebalais).

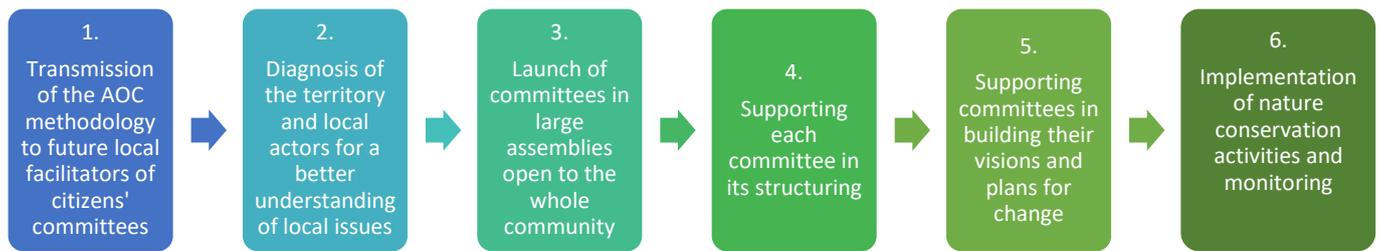
Functioning of the committees :

The committees operate on the basis of regular bi-weekly meetings and on a voluntary basis. There is no per diem for participation. Only a transport charge for those who come from very far away.

Each of these meetings represents an opportunity for everyone to speak out and be valued. To ensure that the committees play this role, the activity coordinators lead the meetings and propose participatory facilitation methods. Thus, everyone's voice is valued, encouraged and taken into account.

Finally, these committees are an opportunity for these groups of actors to interact with other groups of actors with whom they would not have direct external access. For example, in the same committee in the rural section of Junaria, there is a local elected official (member of the town hall) and a young student from a very isolated area, in other words, a citizen with his representative who would probably never have met.

What we did and how: steps and methodological tips



First step: *enlarge the team and build tools for knowledge transmission:*

It soon became clear that the team needed to be expanded to include a facilitator for the future citizens' committees in each of the municipal sections.

Since the citizen committees would have to implement environmental protection actions, we chose to build our team by recruiting agro-ecologists trained in the former MPP FDH project. This was important for us, as it gave our team two types of tools: on the one hand, people well trained in change-oriented approaches, and on the other hand, people able to provide participants with knowledge on environmental issues. This combination is particularly important in order to be able to support and strengthen the actors.

This team was reinforced at each meeting on the AOC. We have therefore built various tools to transmit the AOC methodology. These local AOC facilitators receive a bonus for this facilitation and monitoring work.

Second step: *building an analysis of local contexts*

We first decided together to strengthen our understanding of these territories: thus we set up two surveys, inspired by rural development practices based on territorial diagnoses. The first survey aimed to reveal the socio-political challenges of the environments and the ecological realities. The second survey aimed to identify actors engaged in social transformation actions within the different communal sections.

These two surveys and their analyses have enabled us to build up a slightly more precise knowledge of the realities and therefore to know how and with whom to build the following steps

Step 3: *Launching citizen committees in communities*

We proposed a workshop to present/launch the approach within the sections by inviting a large panel of actors that we had previously identified (at the end of the survey phase) in order to take into account different actor profiles (CBOs, political leaders, religious leaders, etc.).

These community meetings are very important because they make it possible to present the process to the targeted actors, but also in a transparent manner to the community. This transparency is all the more important in a local context where inequalities can quickly lead to jealousy. The feeling of being excluded from development actions could contribute to this.

These workshops also aimed to allow participants to identify themselves, based on collective criteria, who would continue the collective process and become truly involved.

The criteria that were set for everyone to choose to participate were as follows:

- form a citizens' committee of 10 to 15 people from each assembly
- these people must be certain of being able to make themselves available every two weeks for 2 hours of time without financial compensation
- these people must be willing to share everything that is done in the community
- These people must be aware that collective actions are going to be set up and that there will be actions that can mobilise them for more than 2 hours

After sharing these criteria, within each assembly, the groups emerged.

NOTE: Steps 4 and 5 were conducted in parallel at the same time.

Fourth step: *support for the committee in its structuring*

Once the committee was formed at the end of the launch workshops, on a voluntary basis, we assisted this smaller committee in setting up its internal rules of procedure and its coordination. This stage is a process that goes through different phases: identifying a coordination team, drawing up its rules of procedure, identifying the operating procedures for working meetings (managing delays, speaking time, etc.)

Step 5: Supporting the step committee in developing its vision and change plan

Accompanying the different committees in building their visions of change and all other steps leading to the action plan.

Here, the support alternates between two-hour meetings and one-day meetings.

These are :

- 1) Building the committee's vision of change for its territory
- 2) Building your path to change
- 3) Building an action plan
- 4) Building a vision of your territory

Step 6: Implementation of *nature conservation actions*

The members of the citizens' committees then entered the phase of implementing the actions that they themselves had included in their action plans for environmental protection. The actions are diverse and varied, depending on the citizen committee:

➔ To participate in the reforestation of the island	<i>Creation of self-managed tree nurseries and distribution of tree seedlings to be planted on private plots but for the welfare of the community</i>
➔ To limit the spread of disease in animals	<i>Deworming and vaccination campaign for chickens and small livestock</i>
➔ To limit the spread of waste in nature	<i>Installation of public waste bins</i>
➔ To develop one's power of action	<i>Setting up thematic training courses for members of the citizens' committees and the wider community</i>
➔ To raise awareness in the community	<i>Awareness-raising sessions led by members of the citizens' committees on environmental protection in markets, schools, churches</i>

The majority of these actions are not externally funded. Only the nursery activity for reforestation was partially financed by the project, as it had been requested by all the citizens' committees and as the seeds and equipment could represent a high cost. But the citizens' committees also contributed materials and some spontaneously set up a collective fund to finance their activities.

Citizen committees are collectives that remain open to the outside world. Awareness-raising sessions for the community help to interest and motivate new members. To integrate these members, the coordination teams revisit the committees' vision and paths of change. And the action plans are renewed every three months so that each member can find his or her place and become involved in an action.

The citizen committees are accompanied by external coordinators (MPP facilitators or agro-ecologists) who play a role in raising awareness, providing organisational or technical support and linking the various committees for mutual learning.

How does this approach allow for the inclusion of citizens who are usually left out?

In rural Haiti today, young people, despite their strong numerical presence, are often excluded from non-religious socio-political decision-making and action spaces. Women who participate in economic associations (mutual societies) or religious associations (choirs) are also absent from socio-political spaces. Also, people with difficult living standards are often absent from all spaces: religious, political or economic.

With the citizens' committees: they are represented. These committees allow for physical participation, presence in new social spaces: organisation of actions, training days or awareness raising in the territories. Secondly, the committees allow young people, women and people living in situations of great economic insecurity to participate and propose their ideas and to take up positions.

Everyone is useful in building the development of their territory and everyone has a vision to share which is necessary for everyone. The AOCs help to reconstitute the social link, which is essential to avoid social fragmentation.

Principles that emerge

- 👉 It is imperative to take the time to know the environment before acting: existing actions or initiatives around the theme; development experiences in the area (good and bad)
- 👉 It is important to construct the different stages of the action by offering the actors the possibility of constructing these same stages. This means that it may be appropriate to have a very clear vision of the steps to be taken but to be very flexible about how these steps can be implemented.
- 👉 The establishment of a multi-stakeholder consultation space requires great attention to the relationships between actors (possible domination) and to everything that can promote mutual trust. In a more global Haitian context where the social fabric is weakened by difficult living conditions, trusting others from different backgrounds is not easy. It is therefore important to take the time to encourage inter-acquaintance in a playful way to create links.
- 👉 The actors know their territory very well and collectively they have a real capacity to build paths for its development: the citizens have their place and a relevant view on the development of their environment.
- 👉 This knowledge and experience of the territory allows the construction of discourses for the protection of the environment that are directly more striking for the local populations.

Positive points from this experience according to Sarah - International Solidarity Volunteer and accompanier of this experiment

Citizens' committees are spaces for strengthening citizens and enhancing their approaches to local development.

The citizens' committees enable the actors to strengthen the development of their territory. Indeed, building actions for the protection of the environment according to change-oriented modalities is an innovative and new way for local populations to consider development actions.

For example, in two committees (Labi in the communal section of Aghadione rive Gauche, in the commune of Hinche, and Miwosis in the communal section of Crête brulé, in the commune of Mirebalais), members decided to propose an activity not foreseen in the action plan in order to respond to the problems their communities were facing. These were the significant losses of goats and chickens. They therefore proposed to carry out deworming and vaccination campaigns. Since the proposals were unanimously supported and the costs were largely affordable, these two committees carried out these actions very quickly for the direct benefit of their communities. These actions

demonstrate that local populations are able to participate in the implementation of territorial public actions in the interest of the greatest number.

Note: given that each of these actions is prepared in advance in a collective manner, the committee members are also strengthened on the issues that interest them in order to be even more at ease

-another example, the mapping exercise of its territory, which made it possible to become aware of the resources available on the territory and their unequal distribution



Above: two photos, on the one hand the workshop for the mapping of the territory's resources (water points, groves, forest areas, soil quality) and on the other hand the schematisation that was made afterwards

Citizens' committees to facilitate the emergence of non-political collective action

The committees enable a collective and citizen-based approach to the territory to be built. This is done by examining the needs, resources and potential of the territory from the citizens' point of view.

Indeed, the committees represent citizens' spaces that allow to free the word and to build a collective reflection on the way the actors perceive the azimuthal actions that can be practiced on their territories.

The committees allow for the creation of links between actors from different socio-political backgrounds. The committees are rather unique spaces, as they are non-religious and non-political, which allows actors who are not necessarily linked (by friendship networks and others) to exchange and listen to each other.

Citizens' committees to promote environmental awareness

-Citizens' committees put environmental protection back on the agenda for different actors, including elected officials who participate in the committees.

the citizens' committees allow a large number of relevant environmental protection actions to be implemented: tree nursery, awareness-raising day on practices harmful to the environment, etc.



Citizens' committees to encourage and promote committed local actors

-The fact that it is the actors themselves who run and organise the social spaces that have been set up (awareness-raising workshops, training, etc.) is very rewarding

First of all, there is the visibility that this gives them. Indeed, the experience of the actors in leading multi-actor collective events is very disparate and for some it is totally new. Also, they are physically put in the spotlight.



Secondly, committee members during these activities (environmental awareness day for young people, or training on animal health, etc.) have the opportunity to propose activities to their peers that they know are useful and expected. This is an important source of pride.

Taking a step back from activities

Concerning the social activities of community presentation :

It is a powerful act to introduce oneself to an assembly as new community leaders. All the more so if they are actors who are not used to speaking in public spaces. This is therefore an important step that must be accompanied beforehand by exercises in speaking and self-presentation, as it can also be extremely violent or intimidating. Let us take the example of a workshop organised by the Terre Cassée citizens' committee in the communal section of Junaria, in the commune of Hinche. This committee managed to gather more than 50 people. However, some of the committee members were speaking in front of large assemblies for the first time and were intimidated. So it is important to be prepared for these exercises.

The (re)mobilisation of the members of the citizens' committees:

The coordinators regularly express their concern about the mobilisation of the members of the citizen committees. How to maintain regular volunteer citizen mobilisation over long periods of time? One solution has been to open up to new members on a regular basis, via community awareness campaigns, for example. Despite this, certain dynamics sometimes run out of steam, due to the absence of a leader in coordination, because of conflicts between members, etc. The team of coordinators is thinking about new mobilising elements: continuing to link up the citizen committees, working to enhance the value of their dynamics and results, giving responsibility and developing forms of community leadership, continuing the work of raising awareness so that members feel concerned about the environment.

It is therefore an experimental phase, from which there is much to learn but also much to imagine! A collective and inspiring challenge!

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Link to the article:

http://atelier.fdh.org/fr/passer-a-l-action/nos-experiences/article/a-haitian-experience-of-collective-and-citizen-actions-to-protect-the?var_mode=calcul

