

# Cooperatives in the Disaster Zone

*Co-ops continue to play a significant role in the recovery from Haiti's January 12 earthquake. As a sobering reminder of how long this effort must endure, CBJ has assembled a brief and partial overview of cooperative recovery in two disaster zones—one new, and one nearly five years old.*

## Haiti Earthquake, 2010

### Funding Support

The International Cooperative Alliance has raised \$430,000 from a dozen national organizations around the world; it is now seeking to find the overall best use for this growing pool, called the Reconstruction Fund for Haiti. Recognizing the cooperative movement's role in future disasters, ICA has been developing a disaster protocol for preparedness and response coordination, in progress since the 2004 Asian tsunami. Its board was set to approve the protocol at an April meeting in Moscow, but the event was postponed by the volcanic eruption in Iceland, which severely disrupted air travel worldwide.

Here in the U.S., the Cooperative Development Foundation maintains an ongoing Co-op Emergency Fund, which for more than two decades has directed more than \$330,000 to 11 separate disaster recovery efforts around the world. CDF had raised more than \$62,000 for cooperative recovery projects in Haiti by mid-April, and their fund-raising campaign continues. The CDF board recently approved grants to support the work of the three organizations profiled below.

### Co-ops Light the Way


The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's International Program was already in Haiti when the quake struck. They had been electrifying the village of Pignon, which—like much of rural Haiti—received a huge influx of people fleeing Port au Prince. Having “boots on the ground” was helpful in NRECA International's transition into providing a key day-to-day support role to Haiti's main utility, whose system sustained heavy damage to its substations and secondary lines.

NRECA International has organized work tours for line workers to go lend a hand, with funding supported by cash contributions to the NRECA International Foundation and CDF. In addition, some cooperatives are working with the foundation to make donations of appropriate equipment. In the early stages of the recovery, NRECA specialists trained their local counterparts to use GPS units to identify and prioritize repair jobs. Work is now turning toward restoration of secondary lines into neighborhoods, as well as reconnection of residential service.

### Extending Credit for Recovery

Last summer, the World Council of Credit Unions began a three-year initiative to extend credit services in Haiti, especially to the rural poor. In the quake's aftermath, financial services were severely disrupted at a time when people most desperately needed access to their savings. WOCCU has supported the urgent reopening of damaged branches, which often operate in tents. WOCCU is undertaking a nationwide assessment of credit unions' needs, while also securing intermediate housing for employees. CDF's recent funding decision will help WOCCU purchase nine tents for homeless branch employees.

### Food Security Work Continues

International co-op development agency ACDI/VOCA was already a major presence in Haiti's southern city of Jacmel, so when the quake hit, they were drawn into playing a major role in providing supplies needed for daily survival. They are now returning to their previous work on food security, as well as focusing on job training and creation. These trainings will assist in the development of a craft cooperative and support an existing coffee co-op. 

### FSC Seeks to Help Relaunch Agriculture

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives has a long history of organizing cooperative responses to poverty, as well as working in a disaster zone. FSC hopes to bring Haitian farmers to its training center in Alabama for long-term trainings, and also send members down to Haiti to help restart food production. FSC also hopes to address Haiti's deforestation with a novel method of agro-forestry, in which goats sustainably graze in timberlands.

## Hurricane Katrina, 2005

### Jobs in the Lower Ninth

Lagniappe Lifestyle Services Cooperative has grown out of the ruins of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. After the storm, a group of workers at St. Margaret's nursing home began discussing how they could improve their quality of life. Once launched as an independent business, the co-op's 14 members plan to offer foodservice and facilities management services to their current employer, as well as other care facilities in the area.



*Lagniappe member Antoinette Tobias and prospective member Keandra Junius prepare to serve a meal at the St. Margaret's nursing home in New Orleans, which has been supporting the creation of an independent worker cooperative to provide facilities management services.*

photo: Jessica Meehan



*NRECA volunteers survey a tangled mess of damaged power lines in Port au Prince, in the days following Haiti's January 12 earthquake.*

photo: courtesy NRECA



*A crew from EdH, Haiti's main electrical utility, work to repair a substation in the aftermath of the January 12 earthquake.*

photo: Bud Stanley

### Fisheries Cooperatives

Two fishing co-ops have formed to help the industry rebound, giving small operators another chance in a consolidating industry now threatened by a catastrophic oil spill.

In the Mississippi River delta's southernmost areas, more than 80 percent of fishing fleets were wiped out by the hurricanes of 2005. That same fall, co-op organizing began, and resulted in the South Plaquemines United Fishermen's Cooperative. The co-op is working on building shared dock and service facilities, as well as a distribution network for its members' catch.

Meanwhile, near the Texas border, another co-op is forming in the area also devastated by Hurricane Ike in 2008. The Gulf Coast Fisheries Cooperative has received a \$1.1 million grant from the Louisiana Recovery Authority to build a processing facility in Hackberry. Plans have been drawn up and land acquisition is underway.

**This year's oil spill is a new blow to the Gulf Coast, which will impact existing co-ops and increase the need for new ones. Watch for follow-up stories in future issues of CBJ.**


### Feeding the Big Easy

Katrina's damage scattered the organizers of the New Orleans Food Co-op and upended all assumptions about feasibility. After regrouping, the co-op first explored creating a mobile market before eventually shifting back to planning a more typical grocery store; it plans to open its doors in early 2011, as the anchor retail tenant of the New Orleans Healing Center.

The Latino Farmers Cooperative of Louisiana operates a 2,500 square foot urban community garden, with plans for a major expansion on the West Bank. They have not yet produced enough to sell regularly, but have met their more than 100 members' needs for affordable fresh produce. The co-op recently held a workshop on chicken coop construction, and organized a bulk purchase of chicks.

Another cooperative effort is the Indian Springs Farmers' Cooperative, a co-op of Mississippi farmers growing traditional Southern crops; the co-op helps members reach markets like New Orleans' Crescent City Farmers Market, delivering goods on a co-op truck.

### Coastal Housing

On the Alabama coast, south of Mobile, many residents still need help replacing or repairing their homes, and are stymied by building codes that require new construction to be elevated by as much as 16 feet. One group in the rural fishing community of Coden seeks to form an affordable cooperative with 50-100 units, as a way to finally attain good housing. 

### “Coopalooza” Bound for Social Forum

This June, a crew of New Orleanians will dance their way to the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit. The worker-owned music group Rhythm Conspiracy plans to take the classic New Orleans jazz parade on tour to raise awareness about co-ops, and their city's continuing struggles. They will travel by train, with stops planned in Baton Rouge, La. and Chicago. More information at [www.culturepac.com](http://www.culturepac.com).