



GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

## Light it up

In Haiti, solar power at a rural school changes the educational landscape, and how residents see their future.

It's 8 p.m. on a Tuesday and the sky is already completely dark—the kind of inky blackness that prevents you from seeing your hand in front of your face. For the next 11 hours, Haitians living in rural communities without access to gridlines—about 40 per cent of the population—exist in total darkness, unless they create their own light.

That is the situation in Marialapa, a community of 1,500 people located a three-hour walk away from the closest town, which, until recently, was the nearest source of communal light.

The cricket crackle and deep-throated calls of frogs reverberate through the evening air instead of the hum of streetlights. There are no hydro poles; and, before July 2017, zero electricity to run lights, let alone luxury items like refrigerators or washing machines. The lack of light also meant activities that should be non-negotiable—like completing the day's homework—were tricky to tackle.

Grade 11 student Franco used to arrive home at 4 p.m., after a three-hour walk home from school. There is no high school in Marialapa. He would change out of his uniform before moving the animals from one grassy area to another. Exhausted, he'd take a nap, and then wake up to study, using the light from a kerosene lamp or, more recently, a tiny solar-powered mini-lamp, meant for individual use.

Provided by WE in 2013 through Unite to Light, a program founded by American Gisela Voss in memory of her son Luke, the mini-lights are frequently used throughout the rural communities WE works with in Haiti to help students study at home. “The little lights were a good help for us,” Franco says, speaking in Creole through a translator. But they weren't enough to give students what they needed to learn at their best.



In 2014, WE built the new primary school in Marialapa. In the summer of 2017, it became WE’s first solar-powered campus in Haiti. The solar electricity powers light bulbs in every classroom and on the wraparound porches. There’s even enough power to charge electronics; for the first time, the school is talking about adding an audiovisual program. For now, it’s completely changed the way students study.

Every evening, the light from the primary school illuminates the community, and beckons avid learners to its brightness.

Franco sits on the school steps beside his best friend and four of his 13 siblings. They’re chatting, having finished their homework for the evening. Franco’s parents, Jean Claude and Suzette Marcellus, walked over to the school moments earlier to walk home with their kids—a new family ritual. Studying wasn’t as successful before.

Franco further explains, “It’s lifted up the whole vision for the community. It’s set a new image for us. All the areas around are going, h my god h my god Look at that great community in Marialapa with the amazing school ”



Bevensley, in Grade 8, shares his perspective, “For example, someone could be passing by on the street, and they would stop, and say, ‘Wow. There’s a school there. Look at how beautiful it is.’ And they could even see that at night.”

“What the lights in the classroom allow us to do is come together to study. It lets us work together so we can understand much better,” says Franco. High school students gather at the primary school to do their homework together in the evening, classrooms transformed into a community centre come study space.

You need only look at Franco’s recent report card to understand the transformation. Before he had a well-lit study space he scored 52 per cent in social science. Now he averages 80 per cent.

When asked what made the difference, it is a chorus of voices that answer

His dad, Jean Claude “He has more opportunity to study now.”  
His 14-year-old brother, Bevensley “Of course, now we have light.”  
Franco “We all have a greater chance to study.”

The bright new buildings have boosted student aspirations. Franco’s goal is to be an agronomist. He recognizes that he will leave home to further his studies, but plans on returning to use his knowledge to better his community.

WE works with rural populations in Haiti to create opportunity in the countryside, so people aren’t forced to move to the capital of Port-au-Prince in search of work. The development of the school, and lighting it, is one step in that direction.

The area surrounding the school is now a busy promenade in the evening, where groups of friends gather to study, easily checked on by their parents, who also come to chat. Recently there was a movie night, the solar providing enough electricity for a screening—the first time a movie has been shown in the area. The parent committee is working to make it a monthly occurrence.

“The lights are so important to us,” Franco says. “We can see the difference that can come into our community. We can see what’s possible.”