

Haiti's High-Tech Revolution: The 'New Model' in Action

By Alex Thier | August 5, 2014



Pictured: Workers at Haiti's Surtab factory carefully assembly tablets. / A. Thier, USAID

Creating an environment that encourages inclusive growth amidst instability is both necessary and extremely challenging. Nevertheless, on a recent visit to Haiti, I saw some ways that USAID is helping to create local partnerships that provide a path out of poverty.

In a country where two thirds of the population live on less than \$1.25 per day this is no small task.

The refurbished Sonapi Industrial Park, an unexpected beehive of activity just outside of Port-au-Prince, is a perfect example. We visited the site to explore the Surtab tablet factory. Literally humming with activity, the plant is a case study in USAID's "new model" of development: one that promotes local ownership, leverages private investment, spurs innovation, harnesses scientific and technological advances, and demand the results and accountability that enable us to meet today's critical development challenges.

In September 2013, USAID awarded a \$200,000 grant to Surtab through the Leveraging Effective Application of Direct Investments (LEAD) program. With an additional \$250,000 of private investment, the company built an assembly plant and launched their very first tablet, SURTAB 7. These tablets compete with Apple and Samsung products in quality and functionality, and they make several versions, with the cheapest designed to be affordable to a broad array of Haitians.

The company has been a huge boost to the technology sector in Haiti, creating a highly skilled local workforce of 56 Haitian employees. Their recruitment practices are interesting – paying no regard to gender, prior work experience, or levels of education. Instead, they select their employees based on how they perform in a series of tests and trainings.

In combination with extensive on-site instruction, this process has yielded three remarkable results. First, 95 percent of the production line employees are women. Second, many of them come from much poorer educational backgrounds than one would expect in Haiti's highest-tech factory. Third, the pride of workmanship is so strong that their quality assurance testing rate is unusually high compared to the electronics industry standards.

This is also due to the fact that each tablet is assembled from start to finish by one employee. Surtab pays its employees at two to four times the minimum wage, giving them skills and income that provide a sustainable path out of poverty.

After having been in business for just a little over a year, Surtab manufactures 3,000 to 4,000 tablets each month and sells its products within the Caribbean and Africa. In the future, Surtab hopes to be able to double production and to export them to the United States, Canada and Europe. Their growth was recently featured in a story on NPR. This bold start is already spawning new efforts, like the upcoming launch of an app lab, and likely production of smart phones to meet the burgeoning local market.

Surtab is just one project. But it is a clear-cut example of how USAID is focusing partnering with local organizations while also utilizing the private sector to transform the face of development. Haiti will require much more, on a grander scale, to provide the basic level of opportunity and human dignity its people deserve. However, the last decades, and success stories like Surtab, have taught us that such progress can happen even in the most challenging environments.

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