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Georg Fischer publishes its Sustainability Report 2009

Clean drinking water restores dignity

Haiti is the Western hemisphere's poorest country. That is why the earthquake that struck six months ago was particularly devastating for this Caribbean country. The Georg Fischer Corporation is one of the companies that provided immediate assistance – with donations and an impressively simple technical solution. Nor is it a surprise that Georg Fischer should become involved in rapidly installing equipment to ensure the drinking water supply. After all, one of its Corporate Groups, GF Piping Systems, manufactures products for the reliable supply of water. The Clean Water Foundation, established by Georg Fischer in 2002, has supported close to 70 projects in 40 countries, ensuring clean drinking water for thousands of people. The Sustainability Report 2009, which Georg Fischer has just published, contains detailed information about sustainability at Georg Fischer and about this project.

There are moments that change our world. They sweep away the present and make people forget that there is a future. That is exactly what happened on Haiti at 4.53 pm on 12 January 2010. A magnitude 7.0 earthquake convulsed the Caribbean country, leaving at least 300,000 dead and a million people homeless. Numbers cannot express the suffering, and they say nothing about fear, hunger or thirst.

'It looked like the city had been bombed,' is how André Mergenthaler describes his first impressions on arriving at the severely damaged capital Port-au-Prince. The 37-year-old engineer from Germany travelled to the disaster area on behalf of the US aid organisation Water Missions International (WMI). Haitians described to him what they had experienced. 'The tremors were so strong that people couldn't even run away. They would keep falling as they fled.' The scenes were like in a horrific nightmare, but a nightmare without any escape, without a merciful awakening.

The catastrophe triggered a race against time. Many people, countries and companies – such as Georg Fischer – wanted to help Haiti, but phone and Internet connections had been destroyed. Organisations such as WMI, which have been involved in development aid for many years and had a team stationed in Haiti, faced a total blackout. Brad Reed, Chief Operating Officer of WMI, explains: 'It was extremely difficult even to reach our own people.' The most urgent task was to rescue victims trapped in the debris and to dispense food and water. And to top it all, the threat of epidemics was ever present. No wonder, then, that the survivors huddling in their makeshift camps had no alternative but to still their thirst with water from open holes in the earth.

This was the cue for Water Missions International, which drew on technology from Georg Fischer. Back in 2008, Brad Reed and Chris Blumer, Head of the Americas Business Unit at GF Piping Systems in Tustin, California, had agreed on cooperation. The agreement now began to take concrete shape. As soon as news of the quake was known, Clean Water, a foundation of the Georg Fischer Corporation, donated 50,000 dollars in immediate aid. Then employees at GF Piping Systems got down to practicalities. 'The goals were the same,' says Chris Blumer, only the approach was different: know-how instead of money. WMI was rapidly able to treat large quantities of water, but had problems with distribution. Chris Blumer explains: 'Brad Reed had told me that

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WMI occasionally works with a distribution unit, but it's made of metal, so it's heavy and susceptible to corrosion.'

This is where the people from GF Piping Systems came in. Within a few days, GF engineers had designed a plastic piping system that was simple to put together and from which six people could draw water at the same time. All the tap stand parts came from GF, were immediately available and were so easy to handle that any layperson in Haiti could put the stand together without help. Each of the tap stands was packed in its own black crate to ensure they didn't get jumbled up during assembly.

André Mergenthaler worked in the assembly teams in Haiti: 'Assembly is very simple, self-explanatory, so to speak. We're now using the system almost as the standard tap stand.' The stands were connected directly to the water treatment plants of Water Missions International so that everyone could draw water himself. WMI deliberately does not have staff distribute the water but allows the people themselves to use the taps. Brad Reed believes this creates a sense of normality and restores dignity. Anyone who has lost his dwelling through the quake can now at least go to a perfectly normal water tap and doesn't have to line up with other people around a water tanker. In the medium term, this approach to supplying water promotes independence and self-reliance. The plants use chlorine and filters and are maintained by the Haitians themselves. Users pay a token amount for every jerry can of water. 'That's better than giving the water away for free.' In the experience of development aid worker André Mergenthaler: 'If it were free, it would be worth less'.

Chris Blumer and his team are pleased that their solution is a success, a success that is based mainly on its simplicity. Blumer says motivation for this project was especially high: 'We developed a technical solution that was realised with our products and our know-how. That's different from simply donating money.' Georg Fischer provided the know-how but also the hardware – pipes, fittings and valves – free of charge. There are now 157 of these distribution systems in use in the hardest hit parts of the country between Port-au-Prince and Petit-Goâve.

Brad Reed is also pleased about the new distribution stands: 'The system is light and yet stable too. That's a good thing in acute crises. But it's also suitable for longer-term projects in development aid. We've already received queries from WMI teams in other countries that would also like to work with the distribution system developed by Georg Fischer.' The water treatment systems and taps are therefore not a temporary solution, nor even the proverbial drop in a bucket, but rather the start of a new future.

Corporate Profile Georg Fischer - "Adding Quality to People's Lives"

Georg Fischer is focused on its three core businesses GF Piping Systems, GF Automotive and GF AgieCharmilles. Founded in 1802, the company is headquartered in Switzerland and has some 130 companies, 50 of them production facilities, in 30 countries. Its 12,000 employees generated sales revenue of 3 billion Swiss francs in 2009. The Corporation makes a direct contribution to the quality of life. Comfort, mobility and precision are the key market requirements that Georg Fischer satisfies with its products and services. You'll find further information at www.georgfischer.com.

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