



# The Haitian Connection

How one entrepreneur is helping to redevelop the island nation

*By Cleve Mesidor*

**ENGINEER HAROLD R. CHARLES IS AMONG A HANDFUL OF HAITIAN-AMERICAN construction companies working in Haiti directly under contract with the U.S. government. There is a vast pool of talent in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora, and many want this talent included when multimillion-dollar development contracts are being awarded to help rebuild the island nation. Charles says, "There is untapped investment opportunity in Haiti for entrepreneurs and small business owners."**

It was in 2009 that Charles secured his first engineering contract in Haiti. That was five years ago—before the 2010 earthquake that left the already fragile country in need of rebuilding. Last year, his Silver Spring, Maryland-based company, CEEPCO, was awarded an \$11 million contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide site development work for permanent shelters in northern Haiti. CEEPCO provides architectural, engineering, environmental assessment, construction, management, and other services. Its diverse clientele includes the General Services Administration, USAID, and the Environmental Protection Agency, among many others. Revenues for 2013 reached \$13 million.

Charles, who earned a master's in environmental and waste management from the University of Maryland, founded CEEPCO Contracting L.L.C. in 2003; he is principal-in-charge of all aspects of the organization. While Charles acknowledges that there are lots of challenges to doing business in Haiti, he says it's worth it: "Our mission as a leader in innovative infrastructure is to have a positive social impact in Haiti and to advance the local economy." Four years after the earthquake, the country has been working day and night to realize its potential as a hub for business, to create jobs, to reduce inequality, and to show the world what Haiti has to offer.

"There is a lot of solidarity with the Haitian people still because of the input and support we got following the earthquake, but we are a country that has for far too long been forgotten in the investment world," Haiti's Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe told *USA TODAY*. Haiti has moved on, Lamothe said: "We have gone past the emergency phase into the nation-building phase. What we want to do now is to go from the philanthropy phase to an investment one. Our strategy is very simple. In order to fight poverty we need to create wealth." Charles notes

that "Haiti's proximity to the U.S. and Mexico is a significant asset, and U.S. trade preferences are huge incentives for prospective investors."

However, the World Bank in its latest yearly report ranked Haiti 177 out of 184 based on the ease of doing business. And Haiti is still the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

But there is some good news. Haiti's economy grew 4% in 2013. Since the earthquake, Haitian exports to the U.S. have increased from \$513 million in 2009 to \$730 million in 2012. "The economy grew faster this year than it did last year," said the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, Pamela White, late last year. "Inflation has dropped, from nearly 8% to 4.5%. Throughout the country, roads are being built and improved. The U.S. government is supporting these projects, with a particular focus on connecting farmers to markets and supporting

agribusiness development. In downtown Port-au-Prince and in municipalities throughout the country, new government buildings, hospitals, and schools are being constructed and rebuilt. We are proud to partner with the Haitian government on many of these, like the Hôpital de l'Université d'état d'Haïti, a state-of-the-art \$80 million hospital jointly funded by France, the U.S. government, and the government of Haiti."

Charles is proud that he started working in Haiti before the earthquake, which has attracted contractors and investors in droves. "I didn't try to take advantage of a bad situation," he says. "I was already there." After the devastation, he served as a board member of the Interim Haitian Recovery Commission to help develop the organization's strategic response. His Haitian-American company, which has strong relationships with both the U.S. and Haitian governments, continues to play a critical role in the country's reconstruction efforts.

For Charles it is important to plant roots in the community. CEEPCO is a member of the Haiti chapter of the ▶

**2013 Brought Many U.S. Companies to Haiti**

**JetBlue** inaugurated its new air service in December 2013.

**Best Western Premier** opened in 2013, becoming the first American hotel chain to return to Haiti in 15 years.

**Marriott** is building a new hotel in Haiti, which is slated to open in 2015.

**TOMS Shoes** opened a 10,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Port-au-Prince in December 2013.



BEFORE-AND-AFTER SHOTS OF CEEPSCO'S WORK IN HAITI: [1] TRIBUNAL SECTION [2] VINCENT GYMNASIUM [3] EKAM HOUSING



American Chamber of Commerce, or AmCham Haiti. The company has not only created more than 3,000 jobs in the last two years, it has trained and employed local Haitians. Additionally, it has hired “all construction trades,” says Charles, including many engineers and construction managers, and subcontracted with architectural and engineering firms. Ninety-eight percent of subcontractors and consultants are Haitians living in the country or abroad. To help stimulate economic growth, CEEPSCO hires locally rather than importing laborers and purchases materials locally as well.

Charles purposely gives back to the country where he was raised and learned the values that propelled his academic and career advancements in the U.S. He left Haiti when he was 16, but has traveled back regularly over the last 36 years. For Charles, this work is personal. Each project he works on is an opportunity to rebuild his beloved home.

CEEPSCO supports an elementary school in Limonade, providing funding for administrative support, educational programs, and social activities. His company's projects at the Caracol Industrial Park near Limonade and at Fort Liberté draw a crowd whenever Charles visits. Many of those people may end up residing in some of the 750 single-family homes CEEPSCO is building in Caracol. Before the USAID contract, this project was the company's largest in Haiti; it is also the country's largest housing community built since the earthquake.

Each home has a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and access to electricity 24 hours a day. (Haiti's electrical grid doesn't generate enough power to meet demand.) The colorful development has a school and recreation areas, including a soccer field and basketball court. The first tenants moved in last fall. Funded by USAID, the project is the latest component of the \$300 million Caracol Industrial Park investment.

CEEPSCO also partners with organizations such as Chemonics to retrofit public places to foster neighborhood social engagement. For example, CEEPSCO completed four soccer fields last summer. The company uses environmental construction practices to help reduce Haiti's vulnerability to natural disasters and to increase access to water and to municipal systems that handle recycling, solid waste, and disposal.

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## Resources for Entrepreneurs Exploring Opportunities in Haiti

The **U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince** works with the U.S. Commercial Service to support U.S. companies interested in doing business in Haiti. Other organizations that fund projects include the following:

**USAID [www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov):** Find information about opportunities to partner with USAID to deliver humanitarian and economic assistance programs in more than 80 countries worldwide.

**Fed Biz Opps [www.fbo.gov](http://www.fbo.gov):** The most comprehensive source of information on opportunities available from the U.S. government.

**Export.gov:** Brings together resources from across the U.S. government to assist American businesses in planning their international sales strategies to succeed in today's global marketplace. Export.gov also hosts information on the National Export Initiative.

**Overseas Private Investment Corp. [www.opic.gov](http://www.opic.gov):** OPIC's mission is to catalyze markets in developing nations by delivering finance innovations that help ambitious U.S. businesses successfully enter, grow, and compete in emerging markets.

**AmCham Haiti [amchamhaiti.com](http://amchamhaiti.com):** The American Chamber of Commerce in Haiti is a nonprofit organization that encourages commercial and cultural relations between the U.S. and Haiti. Its members are companies and business professionals interested in commercial and cultural contacts between the two countries.

**The Center for the Facilitation of Investment [cfihaiti.com](http://cfihaiti.com):** This Haitian government body is tasked with promoting and supporting investment growth to cement business opportunities, expedite administrative processing, and provide technical assistance.

**Commission Nationale des Marchés Publics [www.cncmp.gouv.ht](http://www.cncmp.gouv.ht):** The Haitian government's listing for local projects, publishing invitations to tender.