When a magnitude 7.0 earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010, the Earth Institute was already there, helping to restore the island’s natural environment and address issues related to extreme poverty. The shuddering ground left devastation in its wake—more than 200,000 Haitians lost their lives and over a million were left without homes—but the earthquake itself was not the sole cause of the destruction.

“The well-known finding from studies of disaster impacts is that poor countries are hit much harder than wealthy countries,” says Marc Levy, deputy director of the Center for International Earth Science Information Network. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. When the same size earthquake hit the San Francisco bay area in 1989, only 63 people died. But Haiti had houses built with inadequate building materials and a limited ability to respond with food, water and disaster relief. When the earthquake hit, its devastation was inevitable.

In the months following the earthquake, relief efforts became the first priority for work in Haiti. Medical practitioners and volunteers from Columbia flew down to help. The Earth Institute set up a Haiti Task Force that met weekly to discuss how centers and programs could help. Scientists from the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory set out to study the causes of the earthquake and improve Haiti’s ability to predict a recurrence.

But the long-term goals of addressing Haiti’s underlying issues of poverty and environmental degradation remained important. “The problems that were plaguing the country before the earthquake are not going away,” says Levy.

“The hurricanes are not going to go on hold. The soil erosion is not going to stop. The agricultural yields are continuing to fall. So it’s very important that we remember these long-term problems are also quite acute, and if we don’t address them, the country as a whole will remain in very difficult circumstances.”

About 80 percent of Haiti’s budget relies on international aid, says Professor Tatiana Wah. She was hired as an expert consultant before the earthquake, with support from our partner the Green Family Foundation, when President Preval asked Director Jeffrey Sachs for a policy advisor. With international attention focused on the island nation, Haiti had the opportunity to lift itself from its troubled past. But the process would take patience and learning on all sides, and progress would take time.

“Those who want too many quick turnarounds to move a whole society in a short amount of time can get disappointed,” says Wah. Even the government offices were destroyed in the earthquake, and meetings about the future took place under mango trees.

One of the main priorities was restoring agricultural productivity in rural areas, according to Wah (whose work is also currently supported by donors like Betsie Parker, Nancy Best and Sara Miller McCune), especially because so many residents of Port-au-Prince, once the focus of development work, fled to the countryside. Other improvements, like infrastructure, would follow.

“A Future for Haiti

Even before a devastating earthquake hit Haiti in early 2010, it was suffering from environmental problems, such as deforestation and soil erosion, and other challenges related to extreme poverty. Experts from the Earth Institute are working toward solutions.