Haiti

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Abstract

Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has a history filled with struggle and violence, from its early days of colonization to its present state of poverty, hunger, and political turmoil. In 2010 Haiti had a GDP per capita of $1,200, ranking them 205th in the world. In 2003, 80% of Haiti's population fell below the poverty line, a number that is likely to have increased since the earthquake in 2010. Their economy is based primarily in the agricultural sector, with the majority of production devoted to coffee, mangoes, sugarcane, rice, corn, and sorghum (CIA 2011). Though agriculture is a major part of the economy of Haiti, there is little governmental support for the agricultural sector. This has had a negative effect on Haitian food production because of the financial mandates imposed since the 1980's by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), including structural adjustment programs (SAPs). These programs have reduced protective tariffs and opened Haiti’s economy to an influx of cheap foreign imports of grains and other basic food staples that Haiti was previously able to produce for itself. Even though buying foreign foods is cheaper than buying their own products, many of these goods are out of reach to the general Haitian public. This change in the economy completely devalued the Haitian currency (Gros 2008). In January of 2010, Haiti suffered a magnitude 7.0 earthquake near its capital of Port-au-Prince. That November, they were also hit by a hurricane that seriously hindered earthquake recovery efforts and caused a cholera epidemic that devastated the already suffering country. Overall, hunger in Haiti is caused by lack of governmental assistance, inefficient economic policies, and poor agricultural conditions due to deforestation, erosion, natural disasters, and depleted soil. At one time, nearly 90% of Haiti’s land was covered in forests. The amount of land covered in forests today has dropped dramatically to only 4% (Jacobson 2005). These issues are being addressed through organizations and economic agreements such as the Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement (HOPE); the Haitian Economic Lift Act (HELP); the debt forgiveness program, Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC); the World Food Programme (WFP); the International Red Cross; Partners In Health (PIH); and the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). There is a popular statement among Haitians saying, “We are bamboo. We bend, but we don’t break,” indicating that the people of Haiti are resilient and determined to see improvements in the conditions of their country (Bell 2010).

Figure 1: Map of Haiti (CIA-The World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html 2011)
Background to Haiti

Officially known as the Republic of Haiti, the small Caribbean country has a population of approximately 9,900,000 people. Most of the population is of African descent, and the official languages are French and Creole. 55% of the population is Roman Catholic, and voodoo is also commonly practiced, often times it is mixed with Christian faith. Because of poorly supported school systems, only 65% of primary school-aged kids are enrolled in school. Typically, less than 35% of children who enter school will complete it, due to the high cost of enrolling in secondary school (BBC).In the 17th century, Spain occupied the western part of Haiti and used it as a port. The French later occupied the island to instigate fights with English and Spanish ships. In 1797, French won Haiti from Spain. In the 17th and 18th century, African slaves were brought in to work the sugarcane and coffee plantations. In 1791, the slaves revolted and won control of the northern part of the island, declaring war against the French. The slaves successfully revolted and in 1804, won their independence from France. They later formed the Republic of Haiti, creating a Constitution and electing a president (BBC).  

Haiti is a very poor country, with high mortality rates. Causes of death range from AIDS to malnourishment, especially among children, and statistics show that Haiti has the highest mortality rate in Latin America and the Caribbean (Chelala 1994). 60% of children below the age of 5 are malnourished (Chelala 1994). AIDS is very prominent in rural areas due to the high rates of unemployment and political repression (Chelala 1994). Because of the high rate of unemployment and political oppression, the people of Haiti are not informed about the dangers of spreading HIV and AIDS, nor do they have the resources to protect themselves from it. Medical facilities in Haiti are sub-par, and get by with the aid of other nations. Haiti is also subject to massive deforestation, causing a huge loss of viable land. Deforestation is a threat which is clearly contributing to the ubiquitous rural-to-urban migration, even though urban life has little employment opportunities (Lewis and Coffey 1985). Deforestation also causes massive soil erosion, causing farming to be very difficult. Due to this soil erosion, flooding is very common when there is heavy rainfall. Haiti is also very prone to national disasters. Because of the island's location, it is often hit by hurricanes, tsunamis or earthquakes. On January 12, 2010, a massive earthquake shook Haiti, with the epicenter right near Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. It caused severe damage to the capital and its surrounding cities. The earthquake is said to have caused $11.5 billion in damages (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2010). Because it is one on the world's five poorest nations, Haiti is often the focus of international attentions due to the large number of refugees that flee the island in search of a better life (Chelala 1993). Haiti is also a stopping point for South American drug trafficking, particularly of cocaine. The U.S. Government counters the traffickers with attempts to increase the competency of the Haitian National Police. The U.S. also provides training for the Haitian Coast Guard to seize illegal drugs and immigrants (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2010).  

Politics and Economics

Haiti’s political system has been characterized by constant upheaval and discontent. After the overthrow of the dictatorship of President Duvalier in 1986, there was hope that Haiti would have a real democracy. The masses expressed a desire for free elections in the country. They ratified a Constitution in 1987 in which millions were supportive. However, there was still a looming threat of the old regime who did not want a democracy and who also had support of the military. There was a constant struggle between those who wanted a democratic government and those who did not, resulting in several riots which prevented proper elections from occurring. This outbreak of violence prevented an end to the political deadlock, something which would continue in Haiti's political history for years to come. (Pierre-Charles & Low 1988) The first democratically elected Haitian president was Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. However, there was soon a coup to overthrow him, displaying the tendency of Haitians to change regimes with violence. Eventually, with the help of the American military, Aristide was put back into the presidency in 1994. However, Haiti constantly experiences different groups changing their allegiances. The fact that so many coups have occurred in such a short time period shows how unstable their political system is and how influential old powers can still be. Haiti is a republic but is politically unstable in which any influential group can sweep in and try to take hold of power. (Fatton-, Jr.- 1999)
Haiti, which is the most underdeveloped country in the Western hemisphere, has a weak economic system mainly because there is a lack of political determination to make positive changes for the country. Haiti's economic system, which relies so heavily on agriculture, is weak because there is soil erosion while there is a growing population, there have been hardly any technological advancements in the agricultural sector even though that is the area in which most people hold jobs, and also because of the history of the greedy nature of the Haitian government. Several past Haitian presidents did not show much concern for the economic shortcomings of the country. Since the population is increasing, Haiti attempts to grow more labor-intensive crops, which do not grow back each year, which therefore contributes to the soil erosion in this country. Therefore, the income received from agriculture is constantly decreasing. In order to have a stronger economic system, Haiti needs to replace their old, greedy government with a government who shows concern for their economics, especially agriculture. (Lundahl 1989) Since the 1980s, policies, like currency devaluation and the liberalization of trade, imposed on Haiti by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have counteracted Haiti's agricultural production and have undermined Haiti's ability to run its own economy. Haiti's market was now exposed to unwarranted competition from economic powers across the globe. For example, the condition of Haitian rice production has been severely undermined and really hurt rice producers because it was now cheaper for Haitians to buy international rice. These issues have worsened Haiti's food crisis and have instigated several food riots. (Gros 2008)

Hunger in Haiti

The foundation of Haitian hunger has developed as a result of several different issues throughout the country. The combination of political, economic, and environmental devastation that Haiti has faced during the past fifty years have dragged the Haitian people into a widespread and generalized food shortage. Haitians suffered from hunger even before the earthquake hit the impoverished nation in 2010. In fact, over 5.3 million people were undernourished before the catastrophe in January 2010 (Virgo 2010). Long term effects are predicted to cause an increased number of food riots, further unraveling the fragile political stability of the nation (Katz 2008b).

Environmentally, many different factors have led to the depletion of soil in Haiti over time. The most prevalent of these is related to deforestation throughout the country. The country relies on agriculture heavily as a part of it’s income and food supply. Agriculture accounts for nearly twenty seven percent of the nation's GDP, and makes up about sixty percent of it’s food production (Virgo 2010). According to Lewis and Coffrey (1985: 159), “ubiquitous land degradation is Haiti’s paramount environmental problem. The lack of trees continues to cause soil erosion and wipe out the land resources that the country so desperately needs to utilize. With such intensive deforestation, there is a lack of trees as natural barriers, which results in destruction of harvests. Resulting from various storms that have hit Haiti, fields of corn, sorghum, yucca, and banana have been covered with mud, as well as destruction of means of transportation, making land unproductive and further aggravating food scarcity (Balaguer 2009). Without support to preserve and renew the land, there is a rapid movement from the rural countryside to the urban areas of Haiti, where jobs are scarce. Reverse migration away from the capital of the country gives people some hope that their harvests will fend better in rural areas. According to Lundahl (1991: 429), “rural Haiti as we know it is doomed.”

Political unrest and little support for the agricultural development necessary to mobilize self-sufficiency in Haiti’s economy are the basic economic roots of hunger in Haiti. Without a stable government, politicians geared their actions toward these causes that would benefit the upper-class voting citizens in order to better their political stance. They did this rather than aiming their interests toward matters that concerned the common Haitian person, such as the most basic of needs: food and water. President Aristide’s government nearly eliminated the tariff on imports, causing American imports to undercut Haiti’s homegrown food staples. However, the less expensive American imports are still too expensive for the most Haitians to afford (Regan 2004). The price of imports rose in early 2008, which increased the gap between those citizens who could afford to buy imported food and those who fall into the category of hungry. From 2003 to 2009, the number of imports has more than doubled in quantity (Mazzoeo 2009). Haiti imports approximately seventy five percent of it’s food, according to the US Department of Agriculture. According to Katz (2008a), containers of food are stacking up in the nations ports due to government red tape, as millions of Haitians go hungry. Without support of the welfare of common peasants in Haiti, the hunger situation could not be improved (Lundahl, 1991).

As a result of these factors, Haiti’s hunger issue is an ongoing struggle that brings shocking realities. Every single day, nearly half of Haiti's population go hungry (Regan 2004). In addition to this, sixty percent of Haitian children under the age of five are considered to suffer from malnutrition, and approximately three percent of them are considered to be severely malnourished (Chelala 1994). Seventy-six percent of Haitians live on less than two dollars every day, and in the most devastated areas of the country, fifty-five percent of Haitians live on less than one US dollar per day (Mazzoeo 2009). They regularly eat foods like flour and water porridge, sugar water, rice, and smashed breadfruit (Regan 2004). Already struggling from malnourishment, health problems, and poverty, the vulnerable Haitian people were struck with a 7.0 magnitude earthquake in January of 2010.

Immediately following the disaster, a challenge of staying alive faced the survivors in Haiti. Problem around the delivery of food, water, and medicine became detrimental to their survival, and these resources were essential so that people didn't revert to violence (Mander 2010). Make-shift camps held an estimated 1.3 million earthquake victims following the storm in January. More than seventy percent of these camps in Haiti were found to lack sufficient international control, leaving victims at risk of violence and hunger. The general food distribution program came to an end the April following the earthquake, and has resulted in many women turning to prostitution in order to buy food (Anonymous 2010). Additionally, an estimated 650,000 people will still be living in these camps at the end of 2011 according to The Associated Press (Anonymous 2011).

Food production in Haiti has begun to slowly recover since the January 2010 earthquake. Haiti’s 2010 spring harvest, compared to 2009, experienced a seventeen percent drop, and saw declines in maize, as well as sorghum. However, "levels of food production could have been much worse," according to Mario Zappacosta (US Federal News Service 2010). “Despite the damage to Haitian food production systems and a late start of the 2010 spring rainy season, subsequent rainfall was generally favourable and supported agricultural recovery.” (US Federal News Service 2010). Areas of Haiti devastated by the tragedy in January 2010 see hope for the future and have received generous donations and much support from outsiders, however this amount of destruction related to politics, economics, and environmental impacts have affected this country in unimaginable ways. Hunger is one enormous obstacle facing Haiti, and Haitians hope that another catastrophe like this is never encountered again that will further complicate their situation.

Prospects and Strategies for Hunger Reduction in Haiti

There are many serious challenges facing Haiti with regards to addressing the issues involving hunger. There is no simple or direct answer for exactly how to solve the current crisis, however there are many steps that could be taken to potentially improve conditions and provide the groundwork upon which to begin the substantial and long-term initiatives. Addressing an issue such as hunger in Haiti, which directly affects about half the population, is an effort that must be approached from multiple angles (Regan 2004). These include the stabilization of the national government, the reform of many of the country’s economic policies, an increased focus on education and medical care, and a sustained effort at combating deforestation.
One of the first issues that must be addressed in order to enact long-term improvement is the stabilization of the Haitian government. Currently, the Haitian government is considered by many in the international community to be virtually non-existent (Rosset 2009). If the government can become legitimate both in the eyes of its own citizens and in the eyes of the international community, then that will establish the framework from which many of the necessary changes in economic and governmental policy can be made. For example, changing policies enacted under structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and allowing Haiti to protect its domestic market by raising taxes on imported food staples such as rice would provide the country with an opportunity to reestablish its food self-sufficiency (Gros 2008). Economic policies that could aid in fighting hunger in Haiti include general investment in Haitian-owned small businesses and industry, creating opportunities for Haitian citizens to raise their own standard of living. One method of investment is microfinance, which can be applied successfully to a wide range of small business endeavors.

Another step that could be taken by the Haitian government to address hunger would be increased funding allocated toward education. This has the potential to be especially effective if one full meal were to be provided to students every school day, thus ensuring that, at minimum, children enrolled in public schools would be receiving one regular source of nutrition. This method has also been shown to be effective in relation to medical programs (Ivers et al. 2010). Studies show that providing some food aid to patients with conditions such as AIDS, tuberculosis, or malnutrition not only improves their overall body mass index (BMI), but also encourages patients to attend regular clinic visits which is critical when treating conditions such as these (Ivers et al. 2010). Especially considering the conditions for many people in the aftermath of the earthquake, it is critical that every opportunity should be taken to educate the public about malnutrition, particularly for children (Carlowe 2010).

Finally, the issue of widespread deforestation across Haiti has led to erosion, increased instances of mudslides, loss of topsoil, and generally poor agricultural conditions. The country used to be 80% forested, but today that number is only 1% due to agriculture and logging (Sprengle 2008). Haiti’s current level of dependency on wood as a source of household fuel is simply unsustainable, so steps must be taken to educate rural communities about the agricultural and environmental value of planting trees (Rosset and Bernstein 1992). One community-based initiative is the Haiti Timber Re-Introduction Project (HTRIP), which aims to help small farmers in the development of economically productive sustainable agroforestry projects (Sprengle 2008).

Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed References Cited

Anonymous  

Bell, Beverly.  

The Haitian social movement following the earthquake in 2010 is explored in this article. Bell outlines the specific goals that the Haitians intend to accomplish through this movement, such as establishing a stable democracy, implementing efforts to protect citizens’ rights, making successful agriculture a priority, and rebuilding the economy.

Carlowe, Jo  

Chelala, Cesar  

Fatton, Robert Jr.  

Gros, Jean-Germain  

Written before the earthquake that took place in Haiti in early 2010, this article provides an overview of many of the economic policies and events that contributed to the food crisis and the related riots that took place in Haiti in 2008. In this article, Jean-Germain Gros argues that the role played by the international community, particularly the international financial institutions, in shaping Haiti’s policy since the 1980s not only failed to benefit the Haitian economy, but actively contributed to the ongoing food crisis.

Hosier, Richard H., Mark A. Bernstein  

Ivers, Louise C., Yuchiao Chang, J. Gregory Jerome, Kenneth A. Freedberg  

Jacobson, Erik  
This monograph shows how environmental issues in Haiti have led to increased food crisis problems. For example, it shows that historically, Haiti was covered by nearly 90% of forests, however today less than 4% of Haiti's land is occupied by forests. This deforestation has led to much of Haiti's land being unharvestable, which is playing a major role in the food crisis of this country.

Lewis, Laurence A., and William J. Coffey

Lundahl, Mats

Lundahl, Mats

Mazzeo, John

No Author

Pierre-Charles, Gerard, Margaret Low

Regan, Jane

This article shows that six years before the earthquake hit, almost half of Haiti’s population was hungry. It shows the extent to which poverty affected Haitians on a day to day basis, as well as the economic and agricultural issues that existed during this time.

Rosset, Peter

Sprenkle, Starry D.

Veekan, Hans

Other References Cited
Anonymous

Anonymous

Balaquier, Alejandro

This article is relevant because it was written before the earthquake and gives insight into the unfortunate circumstances that render Haiti incapable of successful agriculture. The frequency of natural disasters like tropical storms and man-made deforestation adds to the tragedy of the Haitian agricultural situation. Though there is little agricultural support, agriculture is what three fourths of the population rely on as a source of income.

Collier, Paul, Jean-Louis Warnholz
This New York Times article, written after the earthquake in 2010, addresses the major disadvantages that Haiti faces both as a result of the earthquake's devastation and from decades of political, agricultural, and economic turmoil. The authors give an overview of the resources and advantages the Caribbean country has to offer that could be utilized in order to stimulate the economy and create jobs. Also, the earthquake is interpreted as a tragedy that could potentially draw attention and aid from other countries.

Katz, Jonathan M.


Katz, Jonathan M.


Mander, Benedict


Virgo, Paul