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Dominican Republic, Factor 15: Human Rights

The Dominican Republic: Giving a Voice to an Invisible People

Neighboring the country of Haiti, the Dominican Republic spans two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. Located in the Caribbean, the country well known for its beautiful beaches and tropical weather is a popular tourist destination. However, the white sandy beaches and palm trees shade the true problems underlying in the Dominican Republic. With a population of ten million people, more than forty percent of the citizens are forced to live below the poverty line—and half of them live in extreme poverty. The poorest twenty percent of the population earned a mere 5.1% of the income, while the richest ten percent earned about thirty-eight percent.

The families living in rural areas are almost always large, consisting of around six children at least (The People's Voice Group). They live in metal shacks, crowded together with the other families and whatever animals they may own, such as goats, chickens, or cows. Rice is the main staple of their diet, along with beans and plantains. Due to the mostly mountainous terrain of the Dominican Republic, it is hard to find large, fertile lands on which to grow crops, so the people typically work on small plantations, growing crops such as plantains (Haq). The most commonly grown crop is sugar cane, with the United States as the main purchaser. In times that the US does not purchase sugar cane due to insufficient funds or lack of need, it is the rural families who are most affected. In cases such as this, the families must hope to find work outside of farming. However, most are not so lucky to find any. Families usually live off of what they grow and hope to sell what they can, but the nearest towns can be at least an hour's walk away. Many times children as young as two and three years old must work in the fields in order to barely scrape by.

Healthcare is an unimagined luxury for those living in villages. It is limited only to the wealthy and privileged. Though there are plenty of doctors and clinics for the rich and tourists, most rural people will never visit a doctor. Officially, the government sponsors a type of socialist healthcare which is supposed to cater specifically to the poor. However, this healthcare requires patients to pay a fee for equipment and treatment. In reality, the poor people simply do not have the money to spare in order to pay. They can hardly afford food and a second pair of clothing; there is no spare change to use on treatment for broken legs, malaria, and the whooping cough. The average life expectancy for the Dominican Republic is documented to be approximately seventy-eight years old; however, in villages, it can be as low as forty-five years of age (Spain).

Education is supposed to be mandatory for children from the ages of six to fourteen; however, this is not strictly enforced (Unicef). Many rural people do not have a birth certificate and thus do not have access to any government assistance whatsoever. They also do not have the ability to get help to receive an education. Most rural children do not have access to school for this reason. Instead they are destined to a never-ending cycle of new generations living and dying in poverty, working on the same plantation. If a village is lucky, they might have a truck with which they may transport their crops to a nearby town and sell them at a market. Most, though, use mules and donkeys to take their goods to sell. However, towns are often far away from the villages and full of other people who are also hoping to make a living selling their products. Usually they must return home with hardly any money, tired with a full day's work in the hot sun waiting the next day. For them, there will never be enough. (Sharpe)

A major problem in the Dominican Republic is discrimination within social classes and genders. The upper class consists mostly of light-skinned people of European descent; however, nearly all of the people of Haitian or African descent live in poverty. Bigotry and discrimination against those of Haitian heritage

is especially prevalent. Women are also typically unrecognized as anything other than a wife and house-keeper. Even though women make up around sixty-two percent of university students in the Dominican Republic cities and are the head of approximately thirty-eight percent of households, women have a much higher unemployment rate than men do. (Manuel)

Such a distinction between sex and race violates the very basics of human rights. Human rights, however, is subjective to the people and culture of a country. Many countries, for example, may consider equality as elevating the men and disregarding the women, as their beliefs state women as inferior. Others may see no problem with children working fourteen hour days in factories or fields. However, human rights should not be seen as a gray field with varying terms of acceptable human treatment. All people deserve to be treated with equal respect, regardless of sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, or anything else that a privileged group in power deems “different.” A violation of any of these would be denying a person the lowest form of basic human decency. More specific examples would entail arresting or criminalizing a person based on race, denied a hearing in criminal trial, human slavery, and torture. Discrimination of any kind, whether in terms of jobs, safety, education, etc. withholds the growth of a country.

At least twenty percent of newborn Dominicans as currently known do not receive a birth certificate. They are not recognized by the government and therefore do not have the opportunity to receive government assistance, loans, legally leave the country, nor obtain any basic human rights that are denied them because of their lack of a birth certificate (Spain). In fact, being denied the right to travel out of one’s own country violates Article 13* of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These issues mainly occur with the rural people living in villages—especially those of Haitian descent. Because of this discrimination, they are subject to a life of back-breaking work in fields, knowing that perhaps even their children will not have the ability to receive an education and work out of the poverty they are born into. Food will always be scarce as long as they are treated as second-class citizens; many of the wealthy want nothing to do with them, and they will continuously be taken advantage of.

As is often necessary, people will leave their village and look for jobs in the cities in order to supplement their families’ income. They usually find menial labor as hotel maids or kitchen cooks, and females are exploited and paid less than the men. Women, if they cannot find work to feed their families, are often trafficked—the Dominican Republic is in the top four worst countries for human trafficking. Because of a lesser income, they can hardly supplement their families back in their home village with enough money for food.

Girls in rural villages are encouraged to drop out of school, if they ever enrolled in the first place (Perez). Unless it is absolutely necessary to work in the city to help their families, they are to stay home and rear a family. They are not supported in continuing their education. This results in a lesser income for a family and leads to a never-ending circle of poverty. Equality for all will lead to progress for all, and a better future. As long as women and Haitian-descended people are being under-utilized, Dominican society will never realize its full potential but will continue within poverty and hunger.

This situation is only worsening for the Haitian Dominicans. An estimated two hundred thousand are currently in danger of losing their Dominican citizenship (Editorial Board). Without their citizenship, they will be even more discriminated against and will result in even more food scarcity. Hope for their children to be able to educate themselves and work out of poverty will be gone. They will not be able to find jobs at all and have a harder time selling their crops, and income that could have been used for buying food for their family will be lost.

The government of the Dominican Republic is not helping to end the discrimination against Haitian Dominicans; instead, they are aggravating and encouraging the situation. It was the Dominican courts that ruled for the two hundred thousand people to lose their citizenship (Barcia.) They are unfairly targeted by law enforcement, and are illegally transported to Haiti by government agencies. Not only are those of

Haitian descent are deported; often a Dominican citizen with darker skin will also be sent out of the country to starve in Haiti. The families of those who are illegally deported lose not only a loved one, but also their chance of survival. Even the families who did have enough food would lose income and many would starve to death.

The use of all citizens, regardless of gender or nationality, is imperative in order for a country to thrive. If the Dominican Republic does not utilize everyone but chooses to only use a portion of the population, they cannot hope to end poverty. In order to maintain food security, the social stratifications must be abolished. The empowering of all people will lead to a stronger country with a larger income. Families would be able to afford to feed their children. Higher income would also lead to a better, more nutritious diet, rather than having to live on rice and plantains, or whatever crops they grew.

Water cleanliness is also a problem within the Dominican Republic. Drinking the water often leads to infections, parasites, and other intestinal diseases; however, without access to healthcare, the destitute have no way of healing. They cannot afford clean water, either. Though they are supposed to have access to the government-subsidized healthcare, they simply cannot afford to pay the fee that is required. Having access to clean, unspoiled drinking water ought to be a basic human right, instead of one reserved only for the privileged. When unclean water is used for cooking, it also makes the food unsafe. Approximately sixty-one percent of young children contract life-threatening diseases. Though the unclean water may not necessarily cause the illnesses, having clean water would help prevent contracting them in the first place. However, as long as bacteria from the water are ravaging their immune systems, they will be susceptible to even worse diseases, with no doctor to seek medical treatment from.

Birth certificates need to be made mandatory for all citizens, and should be easily obtainable. If the Dominican Republic government implements a program helping its citizens receive a birth certificate, it will be better for the country later on. Having access to higher education and jobs will result in a greater source of revenue for the entire country. More people will be able to work out of poverty and feed their families. With a birth certificate, citizens will be able to obtain loans and live in more than simply a rusty metal shack.

Only about 2.2 percent of the country's GDP goes into funding public schools. As a result, families are made to pay for supplies and mandatory uniforms. This is another reason why many people cannot send their children to school—any money must be used to buy food, and there is nothing to spare for notebooks and collared blouses. However, if public schooling is made completely free and available to all children, the people will be more qualified to work advanced jobs and further advance the Dominican Republic. If more funding goes into the education system, the next generation of children will be less impoverished and instead be prepared for the advancement of the world. (Thomas)

In order to stop discrimination against women and Haitian Dominicans, the government ought to implement a program that is similar in idea to the United State's Affirmative Action Program. Instead of refusing to hire them, they ought to be actively sought out in order to bring about more equal opportunities. Pay rates need to be made equal for everyone, regardless of gender or descent. In this matter, everyone who has a job will be able to feed their dependents, instead of women needing to work two menial jobs in order to send money to her home village. Also, all people, whether they live in rural or urban areas, should have access to government assistance if they need it.

One of the Millennium Development Goals for 2015 is to achieve gender equality by educating girls and increasing women's participation in the work force (WorldBank). In the Dominican Republic, this can be achieved by requiring all children to go to school—and keeping the education program free. Instead of allowing girls to live in villages and environments that state they should drop out of school, they should be encouraged to continue their education. They need to be given assurance that in the future, they have

every equal right to a job as the men do. Having a country full of self-assured, educated, working people will lead to a stronger future, where so many people no longer have to live in fear of starvation.

The illegal deportation of Dominican citizens to Haiti is only harming the country. A direct violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles 7, 9, and 10*, it is causing families to lose their chance of income from growing and selling their crops. The people can hardly hope to adjust to such a loss. The entire family is counted on to grow and sell food, and losing even one member of the family can mean countless hungry seasons. Many of the people who are deported end up dying in Haiti, as they do not have friends or a means of earning income or food. The Dominican government is only sentencing its citizens to a death sentence, instead of recognizing them for their full potential.

Despite some of the problems the Dominican Republic government is having with social inequality, some politicians have at least started a program in attempt to help combat discrimination. Currently, the government is running the Solidaridad program, targeting those who live in extreme poverty and attempting to provide them with health care, clean water, and education. It emphasizes food security and tries to encourage school attendance. This is a superb program that will eventually help reduce the extreme poverty and food scarcity. However, it does not quite have the full support of the government behind it. If the government attempts to expand the Solidaridad program, it will help lead the country into a better state of food security.

Of course, programs such as these require funds, which are hard to come by in a developing third-world country. However, in the Dominican Republic, poverty is mainly located on the west side of the island. While the poor certainly live on the east side also, that part of the country is mainly comprised of tourists and the rich. Requiring higher taxation on the resorts, tourist attractions, and other places catering to the rich would help alleviate the stress placed on the government to find funds—requiring, of course, that the money goes directly to funding relief programs.

While there may be many solutions to fixing food security, an often-overlooked problem is not just obtaining it, but also keeping and growing the country in a food-secure state. All too often will funds, programs, or even crops be exploited and taken for a select few privileged peoples, leaving the country in the same state as it was before. Fighting corruption is as necessary as achieving food security. The best people to do so are the locals of the country. However, the vast majority lack the empowerment, education, or ability to do this. Instead of simply equipping a large group of people, growth of a country should start small, from the bottom, and build up. Empowering one person, who then goes out and inspires more, will lead to a stronger, more resolute people. Though an in-depth, singular-person empowerment would certainly take longer than inspiring the masses, it will lead to a stronger foundation. It is the people of a country who will make the most impact and decide the course of their country's future. The development and empowerment of a people must go hand-in-hand with food security.

Though many of these solutions may seem far-fetched and hard to achieve, the basic human rights of people is not something to be left upon a whim. Equal living will lead to a thriving country. If people are receiving higher education, they will also receive a higher paycheck. The government will receive higher taxes, but most importantly, starvation will not be as much of a prevalent issue. As long as one group of people is considered more valuable than another, society will deem them as useless and will continue in a never-ending circle of poverty and discrimination. Change will not be quick; it will take small changes and little steps. However, if the government helps to implement and improve programs such as the ones suggested, the Dominican Republic will change for the better. Those who are more fortunate should assist in paying for and supporting the programs for the destitute. The ability to live without fear of starvation should not be a privilege; it should be an essential right of the people. For the Dominicans, there is hope of a better, more secure future.

*Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all people are equal and protected under the law, without any type of discrimination

Article 9 states that no person is to be capriciously arrested

Article 10 requires all people accused of criminal activity to have access to an impartial and public trial

Article 13 states the right of all people to legally leave and return to their own country

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