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Malnutrition in Haiti: Its Economic Causes and Effects

It is estimated that as much as seventy-five percent of Haiti's population lives in poverty. Because of this, much of Haiti is severely malnourished. Many factors can explain such high numbers: poor agricultural conditions, violence, an unpredictable political environment. This combination of unfortunate circumstances makes Haiti the poorest country in the world. It is clear that the rural and urban indigent populations of Haiti suffer malnutrition because of the country's economic policies.

Haiti is a densely populated country on the island of Hispaniola, in the Caribbean. Haiti shares the island with the Dominican Republic. About 250 Haitians crowd into each square kilometer. A typical Haitian family is large. Creole is the most common spoken language, although French and English are also spoken. Roman Catholicism is the most common religion, but Protestantism and voodoo are also practiced.

Haiti is one of the least-developed countries in the Western Hemisphere, and is among the poorest of the world. It ranks 150th of 175 countries in the United Nation's Human Development Index. In 2002, it was estimated that Haitians are the fourth most undernourished of the world, behind only Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. As a developing country, Haiti's economy is still very small and weak. It has limited trade with other countries, and the goods it is able to trade are very expensive. Therefore, to the poor residents of Haiti who cannot afford to buy all of their food products, the months of June to August are known as "the hungry months." Much of the country during these months goes hungry because food prices have risen so high.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, about 3.8 million Haitians don't get enough to eat. In addition, about twenty-three percent of all children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition, putting Haiti's future in jeopardy.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several surveys and studies were made in Haiti to discover the severity of the malnutrition in the lives of ordinary Haitians. One study found that about seventy-seven percent of children were malnourished. A later study revealed that the average daily food intake for adults was about 1,900 calories, which is only eighty-six percent of what the World Health Organization recommends. Haiti's supply of drinking water is also contaminated in many areas of the country. It is estimated that only forty percent of Haiti's population, roughly eight million people, has clean drinking water. This is one cause of the soaring rate of maternal mortality and ailments like diarrhea, which can lead to more serious problems for poor Haitians.

About three quarters of Haiti's population lives in rural areas. In Haiti, land is the most valuable rural commodity. About seventy-five percent of Haiti's population lives in rural areas. Extended families sometimes live together: grandparents, parents, and children. The entire family works together in the fields. Women, who are much more a part of the labor force than are women in neighboring countries, help with harvesting and weeding, while doing their normal household chores. Many women also cultivate fruits and vegetables to sell at market.

Children who live on farms have very little opportunity to attend school. In addition to their help being needed in the fields, many families cannot afford to send their children to school. Although public education is free, the fees for uniforms and food are often too expensive for

families to pay. As a result, less than sixty-five percent of children eligible for primary school are enrolled, and about sixty-three percent of those who are enrolled will complete their primary education.

Rural living has many problems. Equal division of land among heirs has resulted in increasingly smaller plots of land. The majority of this land must be dedicated to cash crops, which leaves even less land for the production of domestic staples. Much of this soil is poor, as only about twenty percent of Haiti's land is arable, and farmers cannot grow enough to feed their families, let alone sell produce for a profit. Many food products, including imported grain and meat are too expensive for the typical rural family.

In addition, the Haitian government eliminated subsidies for fertilizers, as well as removed protective tariffs on farmers' grains. In recent years, Haiti has cut tariffs on U.S.-grown rice by twenty-seven percent, bankrupting many farmers. Although some programs are currently in place to help farmers survive in the short run, no answer has yet been found to cure Haiti's rural problems.

Haiti's urban areas are equally troubled. The population of Haiti's urban areas is concentrated in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and in five or six other large cities. Although nuclear families usually live together, living conditions are very cramped. The population in large cities has been growing for many years. Workers come to the city in search of jobs which are low-paying and difficult to find. Only about half of Haitian adults have paying jobs. Much of the money earned by urban workers is sent back to family in rural areas. Unskilled workers often have foreign manufacturing jobs, where pay is very low. The government is under pressure to keep costs down, and workers' rights are secondary to foreign investors' profits.

Urban population has grown not only because of migration from rural areas but also because the birth rate is rapidly increasing. On average, there are about thirty-four births per one thousand people. For this same number of people, there are only about thirteen deaths. The Haitian government has begun to implement family planning methods, especially in cities, but the population growth continues to rise.

Little headway has been made in rectifying Haiti's social ills because of its long history of political unrest. In the last century alone, Haiti's government has evolved numerous times. Since 1915, Haiti has been governed by U.S. occupying forces; the Duvalier family dictatorship; the democratically elected Jean Bertrand Aristide; a military regime which seized control in a violent coup; and a second democratically elected president, Rene Preval. In 1991, a military coup ousted Aristide, killing thousands of Haitians. Until Aristide was restored to power in 1994 by U.N. forces, political upheaval caused the collapse of public services, relentless violence, and economic mismanagement. Currently, Haiti is served by an interim prime minister, Gerald LaTortue.

In an effort to end the violence during the time of the coup, the United Nations imposed an embargo on all goods, except humanitarian supplies, entering Haiti. The main forbidden products were oil and firearms. The United Nations took this step to encourage the Haitian government to solve their differences without violence or harm to the general populace.

To spur economic recovery in Haiti, several foreign governments, including the United States, have stepped in. Other international donors include Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, Taiwan, and Japan. Most foreign aid is directed through nongovernmental agencies. Millions of dollars are budgeted each year for job creation, health, education, security, and

government improvement. In the past, however, much of this aid has been withheld because the Haitian government has defaulted on repayment. Banks, among them the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and foreign governments now require Haiti's government to pay back past loans before lending to it again. Some foreign governments, including the United States, block funds on the grounds that Haiti's government hasn't been sufficiently dedicated to democracy. Although Haiti's government has paid back upwards of \$30 million in arrears to World Bank, it nearly bankrupted itself in the process. Foreign investors have begun returning to do trade in Haiti; however, they are cautious about how much money they devote to such a weak economy.

The United States has been one of the leading providers of foreign aid to Haiti since 1973. Between 1995 and 2003, the United States government sent more than \$850 million of humanitarian assistance to Haiti. This aid has been spent on food assistance for children and pregnant and nursing mothers; health, which includes components of AIDS prevention, child immunization, and prenatal consultation; democracy, which develops media and promote judicial reform and human rights; education, with money for teacher training and curriculum improvement. Finally, much of the aid given by the United States has been devoted specifically to helping the economy in Haiti grow: assistance to small farmers in marketing cash crops like coffee and cacao; giving small business loans to entrepreneurs; and creating space in world markets for Haitian artisans.

Many changes are needed in Haiti's economy and government to bring about effective improvements in the fight against hunger. First, thousands of jobs are desperately needed throughout the entire country. Huge numbers of Haitians flock to cities in search of jobs which either pay too little to sustain a family or are simply nonexistent.

Often Haitians find jobs with foreign corporations. Although it is important to create these jobs through foreign outsourcing, workers' rights must also be taken into account when deciding where to bolster profits on the part of the corporation. Workers must be paid a fair living wage and must have a safe environment in which to work. Although Haiti's government is constantly faced with problems about autonomy, it is vital that new legislation be passed to protect workers' rights when dealing with large foreign corporations.

Secondly, there is a significant deficit in the number of skilled workers in Haiti's industry sector. This is because the education system in Haiti cannot be utilized by all families, especially families in rural areas. Children are needed to help work in the fields, and many families cannot afford the uniforms and other fees which accompany the free public education. Not only are improvements needed in teacher training and curriculum improvement, but these extra fees must be cut drastically for the families, and paid for by governmental or humanitarian aid. Money must also be set aside for a national lunch program, with free or reduced lunch available, especially when lunch at school is possibly the only meal students receive all day. Children cannot be expected to learn when they are distracted by an empty stomach. Without the necessary educational reform, the cycle of poverty in Haiti will never be broken.

One reason why many children cannot attend school is because they are needed to help their parents work in the fields, so that the farm can produce the maximum amount of crops. Little more than twenty percent of Haiti's land is arable, which makes it difficult for many farmers to earn any significant income from their small farm plots. There are many forms of genetic engineering of crops that can aid farmers in getting the maximum yield from their fields. Although this technology is expensive, it was created to help the hungry of the world produce more grain and income to benefit their communities and improve their own lives. Countries with

the resources and technology would be making the smart choice in the long run by providing Haiti with the needed equipment and knowledge, as it will mean that Haiti will need less humanitarian aid in the future.

A major reason that it is so difficult for so many people to live and earn an income that will provide for themselves and their families is political instability. With each transition in government has come a significant amount of violence. Without a stable government to set legislation and keep order in the country, the economy can fall apart very quickly. United Nations and United States forces have both stepped in to control the political situation in the past. It is necessary to reduce corruption among governmental and military officials by creating fair elections and a system of checks and balances for the various branches of government. This allows for development of legislation that will protect the government and the ordinary citizens who are affected by the laws.

These changes would have drastic effects on economy and trade in Haiti, many of them positive. They all, however, require large amounts of money and resources. Once Haiti is able to make money and pay back its many debts, it will begin to build its economy through trade with other countries and will eventually be able to stabilize itself naturally. When Haiti is able to help itself, other countries will be more willing to invest in its economy. This cycle will continually strengthen itself.

The economic policies of Haiti's government often make it very difficult for families to afford proper nourishment. Although Haiti is trying to break into the world market, it is often going about it in the wrong way. By allowing large foreign corporations take advantage of its workers by paying them inadequate wages for working in poor conditions, Haiti's government is doing its citizens no favors. Further efforts must be made to change economic policy so that it doesn't hurt the very people it's trying to protect.

For example, the Haitian government lowered tariffs on imported United States rice. Because of this, the market in Haiti is flooded with foreign rice which is very cheap, and Haitian farmers can't sell any of their own rice. This bankrupts thousands of farmers, leaving them with no money to feed their families. Although bringing foreign trade into Haiti's market is good for the economy, the government also has to think about what effects economic legislation will have on poor families.

On the other hand, Haiti cannot solve the problem of making imperfect legislation by making no legislation at all. The malnourished families of Haiti need the government to increase Haiti's wealth by encouraging foreign investors to trade in its market and using humanitarian aid wisely. This is not to say that the Haitian government makes only bad decisions. On the contrary, Haiti's government is instituting very useful programs with part of the money which has been given to it by foreign aid. Medical programs, AIDS prevention education, and new teacher training are just a few of the developments made in the past few decades that have made a significant difference in the lives of poor Haitians. More steps must be made in this direction to allow Haiti to change the pattern of malnutrition for its suffering families.

Haiti's economic problems demand attention. Haiti has an informal economy, meaning that it is mostly unregulated by societal institutions, and is largely untaxed. Informal economies are often associated with developing countries, but all countries have some form of informal economy. The government makes hardly any profit from the taxes, and most of what it does make is spent paying the salaries of government officials. Haiti does not have enough of its own money to be spent paying back foreign loans or even to be spent directly on its hungry populace.

Many of the loans Haiti still has to pay back were taken out by Aristide's predecessors, and the debts were left to the Aristide administration. Haiti does not get much financial help with the payments, either. Technically, Haiti does not owe enough to qualify for the international program for debt relief. This means that a country would have to specifically forgive Haiti for its debts, or make the government a bridge loan. Judging by how much Haiti owes, this probably will not happen. This means that Haiti has to find other ways to make money.

Another of Haiti's problems is that select members of the government are corrupt, and are looking out only for their own gain, not for the good of the people. Haiti was recently judged the third most corrupt country by Transparency International. Corruption in the government makes it extremely difficult for Haiti to improve its problems without outside help.

Economic trends in the past have been shaky. Assistance came relatively freely to the country from foreign governments in the Duvalier era. In 1994, international donors pledged to give more than \$2 billion over five years in assistance to Haiti. Beginning in 1995, Haiti's economy began a period of growth that lasted six years before the GDP turned negative in 2001. The unstable political situation has been largely responsible for declines in the economic sector. Other factors for declines include the collapse of informal banking, high budget deficits, low investments, and reduced international capital flows. Capital was especially reduced when Haiti was unable to pay off debts to the Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank. However, Haiti nearly bankrupted itself by paying \$32 million in arrears, which was more than ninety percent of the country's foreign reserves. Haiti's economy stabilized somewhat in 2003, with the stabilization of the gourde, Haiti's official currency. Inflation was forty-two percent in 2003. Private investment is very low, but some international financial institutions, which had previously refused to work with the Haitian government, have since begun to do business with it once again. Haiti still receives assistance from several foreign countries, but the total amount of aid has been reduced by about two-thirds since 1995.

Some experts hold that Haiti's GDP will decline as the population of the country grows. The main element of keeping a steady economy is foreign assistance. This possibility does not seem out of the question. Several international banks have discussed new lending programs with the Haitian government. Although the institution of these programs would depend largely on Haiti's ability to adhere to financial goals, the discussions bode well for Haiti's economic future.

Positive changes in Haiti's economy can only mean positive changes for Haitian families. With so many aspects of Haiti's wellbeing depending on the economy, more money flowing into the country will improve life for those living in impoverished conditions. With a more stable economy, Haiti will be able to use its own resources to create thousands of jobs that are desperately needed; invest in improved education programs and training for Haiti's next generation, which will provide skilled workers for the industry sector; and purchase new technology which will help farmers produce enough food and income for their families.

Feeding the hungry in Haiti should be one of its government's top priorities. Without a healthy populace, Haiti has no chance of entering world markets. It is in the interest of financially stable countries to assist Haiti in achieving this goal.

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