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Haiti Rural Degradation

The Republic of Haiti has one of the highest population density per square kilometer in the Western Hemisphere with over half of its population undernourished. Haiti is located in the Caribbean and is the western one-third of the island Hispaniola, west of the Dominican Republic. The island Hispaniola is located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. The total area of Haiti is 27,750 square kilometers which is comparative to being slightly smaller than Maryland. The Haiti portion of the island is very rough and mountainous with only 28.3% arable land and only 11.61% permanent crops. The climate of this island is tropical and semiarid with the eastern mountains cutting off the trade winds.

The island of La Isla Espanola, now known as Hispaniola, was claimed by Christopher Columbus for Spain in 1492. It became known as Santa Domingo under Spanish rule and became the first outpost of the Spanish empire. Its expected use was for plentiful gold supply but that proved to be unfounded but the island was still used for a starting point for conquests of other lands. The original, native people of the island slowly died off due to the diseases brought to their island. The island was soon forgotten due to its lack of natural minerals, this became especially noticeable after the conquest of Mexico, or New Spain as it was called then. In 1664, France was able to convert the western third of the island (now known as Haiti) into an unofficial colony of Saint Dominique. French plantation owners that farmed Saint Dominique produced coffee, sugar, indigo, tobacco, cotton, cocoa and some fruits using the slave trade from Africa.

Slavery throughout the island of Saint Dominique contributed to the social hierarchy of the island. The whites were split into two groups the Planters and the Petit Blancs. The planters were the ones that owned the plantations and many slaves. The Planter group was the group that held the government positions or positions of power and influence. This group of whites were very independent and defied French laws.

The second group of whites, the Petit Blancs, was less powerful than the Planters. They were the business owners, the educators and the middle to underclass whites. They owned smaller farms and had few slaves and were not as wealthy as the plantation owners. This group of whites were less independence oriented than the Planters and mindful of the French law. They were also very anti-black and any free colored person they considered a business and social competitors.

The next social class was the free persons of color; these were the mulattoes (children that were the product of white Frenchman and slaves that had been released as a guilt gift or concern) and the blacks that had either bought their freedom or had been released for differing reasons. These free colored people were quite often wealthy,

occasionally wealthier than the planters and almost always more wealthy than the petit blancs. The free colored people were allowed to have plantations and own slaves and ironically were strongly pro-slavery. The next social classes were the divisions of the slaves; the black slaves, domestic slaves, the field hands and the maroons. These groups held no influential power of government and were treated horribly by the rest of the social classes.

After the slave revolt during 1791-1803 stripped France of their power; Saint Dominique became the first black republic to declare its independence and the second independent state in the Western Hemisphere. Soon afterwards the two new leaders split the colony in to rivaling North and South parts. Due to this the exportation of goods decreased dramatically. In 1820 the North and South mended differences and dismantled the plantation system. A peasant based agricultural system took effect with the dividing of the land and the land often split between the sons. But in 1844 Saint Dominique split in to two parts and became the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Today the average size of a Haitian farm is about 2.5 acres. On these 2.5 acres there lives a typical Haitian family which has seven to eight children and two parents. The family speaks the official language of the country, Creole, and all are poorly educated with an average of a sixth grade education. The parents are between the ages of 25 to 28 years old and the children are between ages 3 to 9. The children attend school but sometimes it may be sporadic and the parents hope that they will have the chance to complete eight years of school.

The small hut that the family calls home is the size of an American living room and is very poorly built. Often many generations live in this hut that is made up of mud with a thatch roof or possibly scraps of lumber and rags. There is a window with no glass and a doorway with no door in this hut. The family is isolated in the highlands where running water, electricity and indoor plumbing have yet to reach them.

The family lives in the highlands and is surrounded by mountains and land that has been stripped of the forestation and life. The father received this land by a claim of long term use. But during his time of ownership he has stripped the land of trees that he can use for an energy source. This is a frequent occurrence in Haiti which once had 37% of its 27,750 square kilometers covered with forests this number has now dropped to below 1%. This rampant deforestation has led to the fertile topsoil being blown away, swept out to the ocean or silted up stream. The blowing away of the topsoil has restricted the quantity of crops the family will grow and their ability to export them to make more money or just to feed themselves.

The families' two children, one boy and one girl ages seven and eight, are the minority in the area due to the rampant epidemic of neonatal tetanus at the time of their births. The family has also suffered one stillborn and two other deaths due to diarrhea at eleven months and two years.

The family has an average calorie intake of 1,300 calories per person. The average calorie intake for an adult female is about 1,800 calories and for an adult male is about 2,500 calories. For a Haitian male this is a 1,200 calorie deficit in females is a 500 calorie deficit. The family is primarily self sufficient raising their own produce consisting of corn, beans, sweet potatoes, cassava, tomatoes and green, leafy vegetables. The main foods that are in their diet are starches. If available fruits like pineapples, bananas and citrus fruits are consumed. The family only eats rice if money is available or if a food relief package comes in to the village.

The family farm also raises two goats, four pigs, free range chickens and a few cattle. The goats that are raised are highly adapted to rugged terrain and sparse vegetation. Goats are the most abundant animals in Haiti, about 54% of all farmers in Haiti raise goats. The pigs that the farm raises are Creole pigs. Creole pigs are cheap and easy for the family to raise and are also a valuable asset; an asset that could be sold or slaughtered at any point in time to cover a shortage in food or a shortage of money. Even with the production of meat animals the family eats very little meat. The farm is located on a hillside and the hillside soil holds very little nutrients. The Haiti rainfalls often do not coincide with the planting season which leaves a very low yielding crop.

There is no source of water on the families' farm so the mother has to spend the greater part of the day getting water and cooking the small meals for the family. The families' total income for the year is between \$350-\$400 American dollars. This is mainly from the father going to the Dominican Republic to work a laborer in the fields for \$.35 an hour. If there is extra funding the family hopes to sharecrop another plot. If there are extra vegetables that the family grows they will sell those and buy cheaper vegetables. The children are expected to do chores on the farm and attend school but sometimes that proves difficult due to the lack of food they are very tired.

The basic needs of any family are what the Haiti family is lacking; affordable health care, alternate energy sources besides wood which is getting scarcer with each passing day, dependable, clean water source, modern sanitation system, and education provided for the farmers in the area. There is also a need for better roads and transportation systems for the farmers of the area to better the movement of their products or supplies. The quality of food in Haiti is poor and to increase quality and productivity fertilizer is needed, more modern tools and technology and a better seed quality is needed.

The factor playing the most significant role in the poverty and hunger of the Haiti farmers would be the extremely poor ground that is farmed and the lack of knowledge that the farmers have in the proper farming techniques. The average 2.5 acres of a Haiti farm is extremely limiting in the production of food for the family and rarely has food left over to sell for a supplemental income.

The farming practices that the farmers use are primitive and have changed very little from when the island was first inhabited by Spanish. The use of modern farm

equipment has not been possible to use on the small, hilly farms so shovels, digging sticks and machetes are still in use today.

The situation in Haiti is slowly worsening as more of the soil continues to erode and the land is deforested. On average Haiti loses 37065.66 acres a year due to the erosion and the deforestation. There has also not been enough funding for agricultural development in the country. The Ministry of Agriculture was allotted a very small budget compared to the population that is dependent on the agricultural way of life.

The families' situation varies with the seasons; even though their condition is also worsening with the constant erosion of the soil. The family is malnourished with half of the needed calories for growth and maintenance of their bodies. The income of the family is around \$300-\$400 US which is half of what they need for basic necessities.

The current Gross Domestic Product in Haiti is \$ 12,050,000,000 in 2004 and is decreasing at an average rate of -3.06%. The population is growing at an average rate of 1.41% a year and urban expansion increased around 4% between 1971 and 1982. The drastic increase in urban expansion is resulting in a decrease of the rural population. This means that Haiti is neither producing enough food nor making enough money to support its growing population and will continue in to the deficit more and more with each passing year.

An indicator of slight prosperity in Haiti is the increase of educated people. Today almost half of the population in Haiti is literate. This is dramatic increase from 1982 when 65% of the population had no education.

Reports in 2003 indicate the situation in Haiti is worsening with 4 million malnourished people, the majority of which are in rural areas. A silent food crisis has emerged which may become deeper if not addressed. Agriculture, the main source of income, has been damaged by drought in the northwest and flooding in the northeast over the last four years. This is causing the national food production to decrease leaving much of the population hungry. To reconstruct the Haiti agricultural system and remedy the low productivity, better soil is needed and more up to date farming methods also. This would directly raise the amount of food available for the family and leave them with left over product to sell for income.

The unique history of Haiti and its peasant farming would greatly help the cause to better the life of the farmers. To be able to use the organizations that are already there as well as incorporating partnerships from the United States would most likely be the easiest way of integrating new farming practices in to a very old way of life.

The collaboration between the Department of Agriculture in the United States and the Ministry in Agriculture in Haiti could result in a long term strategy to improve the soil and the farming practices on a broad spectrum. The modern comforts that people

take for granted in developed countries like water, good sanitation, and soil conservation could be addressed and handled if collaboration took place.

Collaboration would not only take place in the government but amongst smaller organizations as well. If for example an organization representing engineers could partner with an organization in Haiti that also works with or handles engineers and exchange the different ideas could take place and bring a different view to a struggling country.

Another possible idea would be partnerships with credit unions to bring small loans to rural areas with a greater access to a reasonable credit rate. This would help the farmers in purchasing needed equipment, better seed, and fertilizer. Having credit unions may also give rise to farm cooperatives that could purchase equipment, seeds and fertilizer at a cheaper price and better utilize it to help multiple farmers.

In the early 1900's the United States had to occupy Haiti due to a political and social unrest during a time of food shortages and hunger. It is in the best interest of our government to help to utilize Haiti in the best way possible. Thus reducing the amount of refugees that illegally enter our country or intervening in the political and social process. It also spreads good will to have a developed country help its struggling neighbor to become well fed and independent.

To form alliances with third world countries information must be distributed to large, well recognized organizations like universities, other developed countries and private organizations. Making hunger a constant issue in the news is the responsibility of World Food Prize which can continually bring forth new issues. The National FFA Organization and 4-H can provide younger generations with information about hunger in developing countries.

The major factor in the hunger epidemic in Haiti is the malnourished people who are less productive than what they would be if they had the needed nutrients and the poor soil which produces less with each passing year. With a steadily growing population each year this issue needs addressed and that could be done with the partnerships and cooperatives. There may also be long term plans for conservation of the soil and to provide education and money through the partnerships.

These ideas are long term goals, possibly five to ten year projects. Such ideas are making the soil quality better, implementing modern conveniences like running water, sanitation and electricity also integrating in tractors and other modern farm equipment in the farming community. This will take not only a long period of time but also substantial funds. There are still smaller projects that can be done within a one to two year period like supplying trees and composters through a church or private organization. Educating farmers so the knowledge will be passed down or passed along to others is the most continual way to change farming practices.

Bringing food issues to students who participate in such things as the World Food Prize is the best way to generate awareness of needed partnerships in undeveloped countries. Distributing information and bringing it to the attention of the state, the nation and the world is the one way to help Haiti and other countries become self supporting and contributing positive factors to the world economic status.