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The Mariposa Effect

Hispaniola is an island in the Caribbean, and is shared, however unwillingly, by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Dominican Republic, which occupies the eastern two thirds of the island, contains the geographic extremes of the Caribbean, with both its highest and lowest points (CultureGrams World Edition). It has a population of roughly 9.8 million; however, due the extremes of its terrain and half-hearted censuses, it is difficult to collect statistics that genuinely represent the population (CultureGrams World Edition). One of its main exports is sugar cane, a profitable cash crop that is made possible by the labor of the Haitians that typically work the field (Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies). Near the western border of the Dominican Republic is a small town called Luperon, where the more “prosperous” of the area’s rural inhabitants live. In downtown Luperon, there are two farmacias, or pharmacies, a tienda, or store, an old fire station, a disco, and a bar (which is typically well populated). Every once in a while, a clothing store appears in the weary town, only to be closed soon after. Even those people considered prosperous cannot purchase consumer goods. It should be noted that none of these establishments match the standards of their counterparts in the modern world. The farmacias consist of only a couple lonely shelves. The tienda contains rice, though no convenient selection of goods. The paved roads through Luperon guide motorcycles, which often seat four or five people, as they head in the direction of the pueblos, or villages. One such village is Pueblo Nuevo.

It is a place impeded by poverty, yet containing vast potential for prosperity. Despite incredible adversity, the people in this village have managed to survive and create a culture rich with community and character—yet lacking in respect for the women and Haitians. Discrimination against these populations is not uncommon in the Dominican Republic, yet in Pueblo Nuevo the effects are crippling, and not only to those who are victim to discrimination. The attitudes toward women and Haitians have contributed significantly to the desperate situation of the rural farmer. The poverty in the Dominican will only be eliminated if these vulnerable populations are given the rights they are entitled to and empowered to own and finance their own land. This small village—off of a paved road, near a small town called Luperon, in the Western Dominican Republic, in the middle of the Caribbean—could be the beginning of the end of poverty.

Kate Shaner is familiar with the disease that is poverty. As the director of Youth Ministries at First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, she has visited Pueblo Nuevo at least once a year for the past six years. While in the Dominican Republic, she often helps organizations build houses or gives brief seminars on English and art in rural schools. While in Pueblo Nuevo, she has witnessed familiar signs of poverty. Children run through the village with swollen stomachs and skin infections. Men leave home at four in the morning to begin the day’s work and do not return until evening. Women cook what little food they have over open fires either outside or in separate shed-like structures. The routine of life is very monotonous in the village as described by Shaner: “They work, they have sex, they eat, they drink. They get up the next day, they work, they have sex, they eat, they drink.” Despite their hardship, the Dominicans cannot be characterized solely by their situation. Shaner pointed out a unique way of life evident in every action of the people of village. “The sense of community is very different in their lives,” Shaner said. “In order to survive you must live [as a] community, families with families.” Their generosity fosters a communal lifestyle, for while they live in complete and total poverty, Shaner

said, “The hospitality of people who have nothing is overwhelming. Literally, they will give you all the food that they have when you come to visit.”

A cruel irony of society in the rural areas of the Dominican Republic is the fact that women often serve as heads of their households, yet have less legal, social, and economic power than their husbands (Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies). They play a central role in the development and the maintenance of a family. While men typically hold the most power, Shaner said, “Men are silent parents.” Sometimes this is due to the fact that they rise early in the morning to walk many miles just to find work, for most people in Pueblo Nuevo do not have their own plots of land. Men who fail to find work spend their days drinking and playing dominos with the other men of the village.

Staples of a typical South American or Central American country include beans and rice (CultureGrams World Edition). However, for the majority of those who live in Pueblo Nuevo, rice may be within reach, but beans are a luxury—as is protein in general. For those who are better off in Pueblo Nuevo, meat is enjoyed less than once a week, if that. The rest of their diet depends on rice and whatever fruit they can harvest from the surrounding area. According to Shaner, the poorest feed on the blue land crabs that scuttle across the terrain, and chew on the flesh of a citrus-like fruit called limosilla. Although it does not provide nutrients for their bodies it does provide a taste for their mouth.

“None of those children get adequate nutrition. Ever. Romanita, a community healer...was pulling children out from houses to show me how malnourished they were. Their hair falls out. Their hair gets kind of a ruddy color because of their [lack of] nutrition. Their teeth are horrible... I’m not sure how any of them grow up,” Shaner said.

In the late 1990s, government reports claimed that 80% of Dominicans had access to healthcare (Country Studies: Dominican Republic and Haiti). However, another statistic claimed that only 40% of Dominicans had access to healthcare, and the healthcare that existed could barely be called such (Country Studies: Dominican Republic and Haiti). Statistics aside, the bottom line is there is no government-sponsored healthcare in Pueblo Nuevo. The healthcare for the entire village is provided by community healers, always women, who are “kind of literate,” according to Shaner. These women possess basic medical records for everyone in the village. However, these women can only do so much with their basic training, which is typically provided by American nursing schools. “The mothers notoriously never get healthcare. Ever,” said Shaner. This is in part because women are second-class citizens in the Dominican, and in part because, “poor women are embarrassed. They don’t seek healthcare for themselves, especially [on] gynecological issues,” according to Shaner. “So, the other role that community healers have is talking them into healthcare, and talking them into things like contraception and family-planning. That just isn’t a discussion they [would otherwise] have.”

Another indicator of and source for poverty that is present in the Dominican is poor education. While the villagers boast of the two-room school house that was recently built, teachers are often volunteers from the community who show up only when they want to.

“The teachers do the best job that they can with the resources they have,” said Shaner. They teach basic mathematics and reading and from whatever textbooks they can find. If they have history textbooks, then history is what they teach. All of the supplies at the school are donated. Most students share pencils. Those who have paper use it. An area of great interest to Shaner was their lack of art experience, which clearly took a backseat in the interest of literacy, and reasonably so. While teaching seminars, Shaner said, “We spent much of our time making art.

And it was interesting because...they just don't get to create things or paint—there is no color. We were just making mariposas, butterflies, out of coffee filters and clothespins, something you would do in elementary [or] preschool [in the United States]. We spent *three hours* making coffee filter mariposas...They didn't have anything beautiful, or any color, or any artwork, in their classroom.”

The farming techniques used in the Dominican Republic are typical of those in impoverished areas. It is low-input farming in its most reduced form. The physical cost to the laborer is astronomical, whereas the amount of yield is miniscule. Shaner watched a lone man enter his fields armed with a machete and a bag of corn kernels, planting each kernel individually, line by line, until the job was done. She described it as “laborious, painstaking work.” Laborers are considered lucky if they have access to livestock or a plow one could only find in a museum in the modern world. However, most farmers who own land live in Luperon. Those who live in Pueblo Nuevo do not own land—instead they walk several hours to serve as laborers on others' land. The worst of all work is reserved for Haitian immigrants and people of Haitian descent, who typically work in the sugar cane industry, whether it be in the fields or as inspectors of the fields (The Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies).

The roots of poverty extend further than an absence of food. There is a very fine line between those living in poverty in the Dominican Republic and those who are not. That distinction is based on who owns land and who does not (Property Rights for Poverty Reduction?). Those who do not own land have no dependable source of income over which they have control. They have no economic security or stability, and little legal or social respect. The fact that women are unable to independently own land or own land alongside their husbands means they are always slightly economically unstable, thus (considering they are heads of households) passing on their instability to the rest of their family. Without legitimate claim to their land, a legal or cultural authority could take their property, thus making it unreasonable to invest in it. They are too vulnerable. Haitians find themselves in a similar situation, although theirs is even blunter. Often excluded from society, Haitians resort to employment in the sugar cane fields, whether they are harvesting the crop or supervising the harvesting of the crop. Working in the sugar cane fields is regarded as the lowliest of the work in the Dominican, among many of the dangerous jobs Haitians accept out of desperation (The Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies).

From the day they are born, the paths of males and females diverge to dictate two separated, distinct fates. This split reality contributes to poverty as well as a violation of human rights.

“[The society is] very patriarchal. The boy babies are treated very differently from the girl babies. Little girls, when they're tiny, have to start working. Boys don't do anything but get cooed over and [their mother's say] ‘Look, how beautiful.’” Consequently, Shaner said, “[Girls are] used to working hard.” For the rest of their lives, boys and girls, men and women, face different realities. While the men in the Dominican Republic are also confined by their poverty, other aspects of their lives are looser. They are expected to have premarital and extramarital sexual relationships, whereas the equivalent for their wives would be unthinkable. Some men shrug off many responsibilities to their families.

“Women work seemingly 24 hours a day. You never see them sleeping or sitting,” said Shaner. The reality for the typical woman in the Dominican Republic is much more severe, demanding, and defining. “The girls from mid-teens to mid-twenties—if they don't get a job, don't get an education, don't get out of that, they're stuck,” said Shaner. “And [then] they're pregnant [and] horrifyingly poor. They exude sadness. They don't speak very much. So the one thing they do ask for is things for their children to go to school. Can you bring me one pencil? They don't ask

for a pack—*one* pencil. Do you have any paper? Anything for their kids so they can attempt to get them some sort of education so they can get out of there.”

The women who are able to live to old age accumulate respect, having held their integrity and taken care of their following generations. Dona Carmen, a community healer, is one such woman. Shaner describes her as a woman who no longer tolerates any disrespect. Yet Shaner has been there on and off for the last six years, and she has never met Carmen’s husband. He is never there, although his five children are. Shaner once commented on the pig tied to a stake behind the house, and Carmen replied, “[A]ll I ever do is watch children and watch pigs.”

Another population that faces disproportionate discrimination in the Dominican Republic is Haitians. While Dominicans and Haitians share the island of Hispaniola, it is one of the few things that they share. While the Dominicans are descendents of Spanish settlers and colonizers as well as the native people, Haitians have roots in Africa (The Dominican Republic and Haiti: Country Studies). Dominicans strive to separate themselves from Haitians, pointing to their European roots and “white skin” (which they often learn is a darker tone than they think when they visit Caucasian countries). The physical distinction between the two populations allow for Haitians to be identified and excluded from society routinely. While rural poor Dominicans live in villages off of roads that go through small towns, Haitians live outside even these small villages. Of the division, Shaner said, “It is uncanny how humans can divide themselves into classes even in the poorest of nations. It seems as if someone always has to be the recipient of disdain, someone has to be the scapegoat.” While Dominican culture definitely contains vestiges of African influence, Dominicans deny it whenever possible. Curly hair is undesirable, because straight hair is more European.

Dominicans could easily feel more resentment for the Spanish, the French, or the Americans, all three of which had control over the Dominicans for long periods of time. Yet anti-Haitian racism reigns, and begins at an early age. Shaner said, “The first time I realized it was such an issue, I was watching the children. We were working at a home, and this tiny, skinny, little girl who was standing at the fence was not allowed inside the fence...and it was the other kids that were keeping her out. They were hissing at her and spitting at her, and it was horrible.” Another encounter with Haitians testified to their civility. When they walked into the village, people scattered. She turned to greet them, “And [she] just said, *Buenos dias, como esta?* And he said, I’m fine thank you...and this man and his two friends were walking back, they had already walked two hours, from working on someone’s farm...They were quite lovely, very kind, always willing to have a conversation.” The Dominicans, can be as hostile to the Haitians as they are hospitable to visitors. “It’s stunning the way [they] treat them,” Shaner said.

All reforms in all sizes and intensities must meet the same criteria. Above all things, change should be made in collaboration with the communities they impact and *after* thorough research (Pathways to Resilience). Shaner said that one of the concerns of Mario, a landowner in Luperon, was that “the government tries all of these agricultural plans and they never work, because they never talk to the people about what they need and how to help them.” Policies in any field, on any subject, need to be well defined, yet flexible enough to meet changing needs and circumstances. They need to be thorough and self-sustaining, and above all things, serve the people they are targeting (Towards Eliminating Hunger).

The first of the two primary reforms would be to allow women the right to own land in their own right, or at least co-own land with their husbands. This reform would be the responsibility of the government—however, it is important to note that its implementation would mean learning to

work in harmony with “legal pluralism,” a concept detailing people’s recognition of authority from multiple sources (typically the federal government and village practices or religion). Legal pluralism is a complex phenomenon that would demand that the same reforms be made in all areas, yet in different ways. In order to ensure the success of this policy, government officials would have to work in collaboration with community leaders to determine the technicalities surrounding the documentation of purchase as well as the protection of their land. The land that Haitians own should also be properly documented and protected, both by the federal government and the community leaders.

The second land reform would be to allow women and Haitians access to microcredit, so that they would have the means of purchasing land. Microcredit involves loans and repayments, and when it has been managed by an institution that does not aim to make a profit or take advantage of its clients, it has been overwhelmingly successful, especially among women. In response to a famine in Bangladesh in 1974, Muhamad Yunus started the Grameen bank project, which served as an effective method of empowering the poor. The project served (and still serves) the bottom 50% of those who live below the poverty line, and 94% of its borrowers are women today. It has evolved into an institution that allows borrowers to pay as little interest as keeps the bank self sufficient. Sadeh Bakhtiari, of Isfahan University, Iran wrote of this institution in his article “Microfinance and Poverty Reduction: Some International Evidence.” In the article, he said, “The poorest, especially women, when [they] receive credit, they become economic actors with power, they can improve not only their own lives but, in a widening circle of impact, the lives of their families, their communities, and their nations.”

At the moment Pueblo Nuevo is at a standstill. Their isolation excludes them from resources and information that could greatly improve their lives. They need to become closer to the modern world while still retaining their cultural identity. However, at the moment, the vulnerable populations within the rural poor are unable to benefit from either—a modern world that does not connect with them and a cultural identity that does not value them. The first word that comes to mind is “education,” however, education in this situation should be considered an exchange. This exchange would begin by consulting community leaders and healers, and learning about the techniques they have used to keep people alive. The crops they have grown. How and why they have grown them. Areas most lacking in nutrition. People who need immediate health assistance. And the list goes on. The flow could reverse as research institutes, after studying the environment in the Dominican Republic, could suggest nutritional crops that have been successful in areas of similar climate.

And finally, this educational boost should reach the classroom, where it will revitalize reading, writing, and math curricula while expanding into other necessary areas. Girls and boys should have equal access to elementary education. Shaner said that in empowering and educating women and girls, she would hope “They would learn that they have more to give to society than lots of children. That they are more than a commodity, or more than something that someone whistles at.” Social change involves the most fickle variable imaginable—the human mind. However, like any variable, it can be manipulated. Legal and economic reforms for the rights of the Haitians and women would certainly have an impact on the perspectives on the populations; however, another source of social change could be the integration of art into the educational curriculum—or a more broad form of education, one that could be fostered in an art museum, or traveling art show. It would be an experiment to be tested in select areas before its country-wide implementation, yet an experiment worth its while. Shaner encountered children and adults alike who were willing—ecstatic even—to spend hours created mariposas, or butterflies, from coffee filters. Imagine their interest in art with a deeper meaning; artwork that would celebrate the power and elegance of women alongside the value and beauty of diversity. Art has been used as

a catalyst for change in cultures of the world throughout history—it has an effect on its creator, its viewer—the potential for this effect, this mariposa effect, would be endless.

The campaign against poverty will not be one made by an individual. It will not be made by a country, or a continent—it will be made by the world. It will require the conscious effort of every human being we have to foster a spirit of responsibility and selflessness. Yet in many ways it will be simple. The Haitians and women of the Dominican Republic are a hardworking people. However, despite their contributions to society, and their resourcefulness that has kept them alive, they are being confined by a society that cannot thrive without them. And, contrary to popular belief, the vulnerable populations of the Dominican Republic do not need “hand outs.” They do not need sympathy or tears. These people need to be empowered—empowered so that they can live healthy lives in which they can think of more than getting through the day with a glimpse at tomorrow. They need the tools that have been so readily given in other areas of the world, where people not only eat as much food as they want, they throw it away. Addressing gender and cultural discrimination, improving access to credit, and securing property rights for the poor are essential to ending poverty. If not out of the goodness of our hearts, then for the benefit and security of humanity as a whole we need to address these issues. The end of poverty will begin in modest villages such as Pueblo Nuevo—as we empower these people to make a more just global society, let us learn from their values of generosity, so we may finally learn what it takes to create a global community, and finally set into motion our mariposa effect.

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