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Haiti, Factor 9: Water And Sanitation

Water Is Life: Haiti's Struggle For Clean Drinking Water

For many people around the world, drinking a glass of water is something they take for granted. However, for millions of people in Haiti, access to clean water is not only a struggle, but nearly impossible. Most water sources in Haiti are extremely polluted, and drinking them can cause people to get sick with a number of water-borne diseases, the most prevalent being cholera. Yet for millions of Haitians, drinking this polluted water is their only recourse and they struggle just to get dirty water. Only a small number of Haitians, mostly the wealthy elite, have access to clean water, and they sell it to the poor at high prices without regulating the quality. This problem didn't just happen overnight: it was brought on by many long-term causes. It started with the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), made Haiti a free nation, prompting brutal economic embargoes by France and the U.S.A. Next was a series of dictators which led to an extreme political corruption in modern-day Haiti. This corruption has prevented the country from fixing its problems, because institutions lack the power and coordination to make positive change. Government is key to making improvements in a country, so the fact that Haiti's government is in such disarray is devastating to the chances of its citizens being provided with potable water. And finally, the 2010 earthquake brought the country to its knees and decimated institutions that did provide for Haitian citizens. Because of these events, millions of Haitians lack access to safe and potable drinking water, leading to disease and early death; the best solution to this problem is to have the United Nations assist the government in cracking down on corruption and establishing a president who can fix the country's problems, thus bringing clean water to the whole country.

Haitian families vary in size, but are usually made up of immediate family and grandparents, and in some cases widowed family members will live with their children or grandchildren ("Haiti Culture"). The Haitian economy relies heavily on farming, and 60% of the labor force finds employment through this practice ("Haiti At"). Only 30% of the land is feasible for farming, yet about half of the land is farmed, which forces many farmers to have small plots and farm poor land ("Haiti At"). The biggest cash crops grown are coffee, which happens to generate a third of Haiti's income from exports, sugar, sisal, and essential oils ("Haiti At"). The typical diet for Haitians consists of corn, cassavas, millets, rice, and various fruits ("Haiti At"). The education situation in Haiti is tumultuous. There are not enough schools or teachers to support the population, and most of the schools are private. All schools, even government-backed ones, require many payments, such as tuition, books, and uniform fees, so if families can afford to send children, they have to choose which to send ("Haiti At"). Access to healthcare in Haiti is very limited. Medical facilities are low-funded and understaffed, with many unskilled workers, and there is less than one-doctor for every eight-thousand people ("Haiti Culture").

The Haitian revolution can be viewed as the root of all of Haiti's current problems, because brutal economic embargoes imposed by France and the U.S.A. started the new nation on a downward trajectory that increased with time. Haiti's revolution was the first slave revolution and officials in France and the U.S.A. feared domestic repercussions if they supported a country of freed slaves. In an article for Black Past, Claudia Sutherland reports that, before the revolution, the slave population of Haiti was 500,000 strong (Sutherland). The U.S.A. and France were two hugely influential and vital nations at the time for establishing healthy trade relationships that would bolster an economy. The U.S.A. still profited from the slave industry, and feared that by trading with the Haitians, their own slaves might be inspired to revolt. Because of this, the US government instituted a trade embargo that seriously stunted Haiti's economy. For France, the problem was what it lost in the revolution. Haiti was a French colony prior to the revolution, and it was a valuable source of economic output, as the slaves produced crucial wares such as coffee,

indigo, sugar, and cotton. After the Haitians won their independence, not only did they lose the land and the people, they lost all the money they might have made. Because of the vital industry it lost, along with the "property" lost in the freed slaves, France claimed that Haiti had to pay the equivalent of \$21 billion to be recognized as an independent nation (Varma et. al). Because of the trade embargoes, Haitian officials had no way to pay this outrageous fee, so they were forced to take out French loans, starting their cataclysmic debt. The effects of the revolution were felt across the ages, and are still felt today. By the end of the 18th century, 80% of Haiti's budget went towards paying back various debts, and a subsequent series of dictators accumulated roughly \$900 million in further debt, which is only half of Haiti's current debt (Varma et. al). In September of 2008, Haiti's debt was \$1.85 billion and growing, and Haitians pay \$1.5 million towards debt relief each month (Varma et. al). The impact of the Haitian revolution has put Haiti in a hole which it cannot dig itself out of unless major improvements occur.

As a consequence of fixed elections, the 20th and 21st Centuries have seen scores of corrupt politicians who don't want what's best for the country, but what's best for them. A Frontline documentary directed by Dan Reed outlines the issues with corruption: gangs in Haiti are vital to the politicians, who work together with them to further their goals, even killing political enemies (Reed). The police are aware of the widespread corruption, but they don't have the power to do anything about it, and are almost too afraid to do anything (Reed). One good example is the Service National de l'Eeau Potable (SNEP). SNEP is the division of government that manages Haiti's water system. The water situation in Haiti is clearly a disaster, and SNEP has almost no power to do anything about it. Although there are motivated officials in SNEP who want to fix the water situation and help the people, they lack the necessary funds and political support needed to function even on the simplest levels (Varma et. al).

The earthquake in 2010 was responsible for sending the country into turmoil, because it forced people to live in squalor in dangerous tent-camps. As reported in an article by Allie Torgan for CNN, it killed approximately 220,000 people, and displaced 25% of the population (Torgan). It not only greatly destroyed lives, it unleashed a massive outbreak of cholera, the likes of which have not been seen for over 100 years. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, hastily made tent camps became homes for hundreds of thousands of Haitians, were drawn to the camps with promises of aid and replacement housing (Reed). It was a scene of chaos: throngs of confused, scared people crowding into small spaces riddled with disease, with no documentation of who was where. Factor in the debilitating lack of access to water which already existed before the earthquake, and the situation in the tent camps was a living hell. The recent epidemic of cholera in Haiti has yet to be contained, although it is a treatable disease, and still kills thousands of people each year. Cholera is a terrible disease. J.N. Hays writes in his book "Epidemics and Pandemics" that before modern times, there were countless devastating outbreaks of the disease across many continents and regions, such as North America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Hays). Not much was known about the disease at the time, so doctors were unable to save scores of people before a treatment was developed. Cholera can be transmitted in many ways: through contact with polluted water, filth, contaminated food, or an active carrier, because the disease is contagious. Once the "vibrio cholerae" bacteria reaches the intestines, it induces vomiting and diarrhea in the infected carrier, along with dehydration and eventual death, if not treated (Hays).

The outbreak in Haiti has troubling origins. It was spread by the unsanitary conditions in the tent-camps, but its origin can be traced back to one of the world's most trusted organizations: the United Nations. The first cases of cholera in Haitians occurred downstream from a camp housing U.N. peacekeeping troops from the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, where an outbreak of cholera had been reported (Quigley). The camp was observed to have an overflowing sewage tank. An analysis of the Haitian cholera strain matched the Nepalese strain (Quigley). The most disturbing aspect of this, as reported by former presidential candidate and Maryland governor Martin O'Malley in an article for CNN, is that the United Nations denied responsibility for basically causing the cholera outbreak, and a lawsuit against it by a human rights group trying to compensate victims was thrown out (O'Malley). Partners In Health is one of

the leading relief organizations helping people in Haiti, led by the infectious-disease specialist Paul Farmer. It has been a common trend throughout history for the social group most affected by disease to be poorer people (Hays). An article on the website for the organization for Partners In Health estimates that less than one percent of cholera patients die when they're rehydrated quickly ("Cholera"). Combine an earthquake that forced hundreds of thousands to live in hastily made tent camps with lack of access to potable water, and you get one of the worst cholera outbreaks in recorded history. Prior to October 2010, cholera had never been reported in Haiti ("Cholera"). Months after the earthquake, people were living in the tent camps that were their only homes. They were poorly made. They were incredibly unsanitary. It was a breeding ground for filth and disease. The people had to make do with poor sanitation and contaminated water, both of which led to the outbreaks of cholera in the camps and across the country. Cholera is preventable and treatable. With the advent of modern medicine and improved sanitation, cholera is rare in the developed world. Yet, as stated in an article for Smart Global Health by Matt Fisher and Alisha Kramer, Haiti was still ravaged by "the largest urban disaster in modern history". Louise C. Ivers reports in a Boston Globe article that five years after the first outbreaks, 9,041 people have died, and over 750,000 have been sickened, with the worst part being that the numbers are likely much higher (C. Ivers). When a heavy rain or tropical storm occurs, the number of outbreaks rises (C. Ivers). In 2014, the World Health Organization reported that Haiti had more cases of cholera per population than any other place in the world (C. Ivers). An article by The World Bank states that in 2011, there were 30,000 monthly cases of cholera, and although that number was brought down to 2,200 by 2014, heavy rains in the first quarter of 2015 have brought the number back up to 3,400 ("Haiti"). If an effective method of stopping the epidemic is not devised, there is no chance that number will ever be brought down to 0.

Extreme poverty causes many Haitians to suffer immensely from disease and early death, because they lack access to clean drinking water and sanitary sewers. In 2002, Haiti was ranked 101st out of 127 countries for quantity and quality of water (Varma et. al), and since that statistic was taken before the earthquake, that ranking has worsened. More than 55.2% of the population lack access to improved water, and 70% of the population has no access to potable water, with these figures likely being overstated (Varma et. al). It has always been a struggle to obtain water for people in Haiti, but since the earthquake, it's only gotten worse, due to the fact that much of the water is contaminated. The process of getting water for Haitians is not an easy one. Only 2 - 8% of households in Haiti have household water connections, so most people have to rely on other methods to get their water (Varma et. al). The most common ways they do this are to access wells, purchase it from vendors, or drink surface water or water from a public source, such as a river or the ocean. Many Haitians use cisterns, which hold water that is delivered by tanker trucks from public sources. The wealthier citizens of Haiti have their own private cisterns, while the poorer people buy their water from them (Varma et. al). This is a very corrupt practice. There are no government regulations on the price of the water or the quality of water, so often the cistern owners will give the Haitians a bad deal on low-quality water (Varma et. al). For millions of Haitians, this is their only option. There are virtually no waste treatment facilities in Haiti, so people must treat their own water. This is an expensive practice and thus 70% of households unable to treat their own water (Varma et. al).

While fixing the water situation in Haiti is a herculean task, there is also the equally troubling and challenging problem of sanitation. Waste must be disposed of properly, or disease will spread rampantly. Sadly, the sanitation situation in Haiti is just as bad as the water situation. Only 27% of the country has access to basic sewage, while 34.9% of the country uses rudimentary toilets, and 34.7% have no toilets (Varma et. al). The lack of proper sanitation is obvious at Haitian schools. An article by Amanda Klasing for Human Rights Watch outlines the situation: 60% of schools lack toilets, 75% lack drinking water, and many teachers reported that diarrheal diseases often cause students to miss school. In addition, the unhygienic conditions of the schools force girls to have to stay home when they are menstruating (Klasing).

Various relief programs are providing some aid to Haiti, but they are not working together with the government, so the people are not getting lasting aid. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can prove to be a valuable commodity to people reeling from the effects of natural disasters, and they have a history of providing serious help. However, the situation in Haiti in regards to NGOs is more complex. In an article by Kevin Edmonds for NACLA, he states that there were over 10,000 NGOs in Haiti prior to the earthquake, and that 80% of the country's basic services are performed by NGOs, which leads to Haitians jokingly referring to their nation as a "republic of NGOs" (Edmonds). The problem of the NGOs in Haiti multiplied following the earthquake. In its aftermath, the Haitian government was almost completely denied any of the massive amount of donated money to make improvements, receiving less than one cent for every dollar donated, while the NGO's received 43 cents per dollar, and the U.S. military received 33 cents per dollar (Edmonds). The sad truth is that the NGOs are not collaborating with the government. They are taking aid money for their own use and not empowering the government.

Another problem with the NGOs in the aftermath of the earthquake was their handling of the funds donated. One NGO that came under much public criticism was the American Red Cross. It received around \$225 million in donations after the earthquake, yet only set aside \$106 million dollars for relief in Haiti, without saying where the rest of the money went (Edmonds). Meanwhile, Partners In Health, which had nearly 5,000 more workers in Haiti, who happened to also be mostly Haitian, only received \$40 million dollars in donations (Edmonds). Having the NGOs control much of the function of the country in the aftermath of the earthquake and even today gives them too much power over a country. For example, the NGOs don't coordinate with SNEP on which areas need water the most, and often deliver relief water to areas that don't need it as much as others (Varma et. al). Former Haitian Primer Minister Jean-Max Bellerive, who was in office after the earthquake, sums up the frustrations of the people well: "we don't know who has given money to the NGOs and how much money they have given...At the moment, we can't do any coordination or have any coherent policies for giving to the population" (Edmonds).

Many NGO's are still mismanaging money in shocking ways and not helping Haiti to the extent to which they should be helped. A report by ProPublica and NPR outlines many of the wrongs NGOs are committing. Perhaps their most egregious offense is in regard to salary. An article by Nathalie Baptiste for Foreign Policy In Focus reports that, at a housing project in Campeche, the project manager was allocated \$140,000 for various crucial expenses including trips to return home, four yearly vacations, and relocation expenses (Baptiste). Meanwhile, the top paying local job, a Haitian senior engineer, earned only \$42,000 a year (Baptiste). While the Red Cross is inappropriately using relief funds, it is not alone, with many other NGOs also paying employees outrageous amounts, up to \$200,000 at some organizations (Baptiste). Workers for the NGO's live a nice life in the affluent suburbs such as Petionville, enjoying fancy restaurants and high-quality grocery stores, while Haitians toil to survive, and 40.6% of the population is unemployed (Baptiste). Another misstep by the NGOs was when they neglected to hire unemployed Haitians in rebuilding homes, instead deciding to outsource the work to international firms. (Baptiste).

The country of Haiti faces extensive problems, and at first glance these may seem impossible to solve. But there is a way that the situation can be vastly improved and the country can be brought to a point of stability from which it can then begin to thrive. The best solution is to wipe out corruption in the government by partnering with the United Nations and establishing a noble president who can instill lasting change. This is the only way to fix the water problem in Haiti, and the only way to stabilize the country in general, because only the government has that power. Aid money and masses of volunteers simply cannot permanently change things. The government can provide jobs to unemployed Haitians by contracting them to build houses for Haitians living in tent camps (Baptiste). The government can establish a system that provides clean, affordable water to all Haitians. The government is the answer. Not NGOs, the government. These sentiments are echoed by Jake Johnston, a researcher for the Center for Economic Policy and Research:

"You have to change who your partners are and where the money is actually delivered. Haiti has to be able to take the lead, that's not just the government - it's the Haitian people, companies, the private sector, and civil society." (Johnston).

All of the sectors that Johnston mentioned must be empowered. When this happens, the country will stabilize and wean itself off of the NGO's, and the crisis in Haiti will be solved. Sadly, although it seems like it should be an easy solution, it is nowhere near that. It may be impossible. The government is incredibly corrupt, perhaps beyond repair. There were widespread accusations of corruption in the past election cycle. Because of these accusations, many other countries do not take the government seriously, and do not think of aiding it, instead deciding to assist the NGOs. The U.S.A. spent \$30 million dollars to help monitor the past election (James and Lopez). The fact that the U.S.A. could not prevent election corruption is astonishing and does not bode well for the future of the country. But there is hope. The one entity that can rebuild the government is the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). This is a coalition devoted to fixing Haiti: not just its government, but combating poverty and improving access to clean. It is the only group that can truly fix Haiti: it is large and has substantial funding. UNDP's mission statement to fix the government is outlined in an article on its website:

"Thirty percent of Haitian civil servants were lost in the earthquake, so increasing capacity and human resources for public administration is a priority. UNDP aims to boost efficiency, with a particular focus on justice, elections and regional and urban planning." (Haiti: From Recovery).

It will be a long process, but by working with the government and the people of Haiti, including choosing a president from the past election cycle who will bring positive change to the country, the UNDP can bring clean water to those who don't have it, and stability to all. Haiti is a country that has never gotten a fair chance. For all of its history, it has been plagued by both internal and external factors that have prevented it from prospering. The water crisis is a terrible situation that is affecting the health and welfare of millions of people. The people of Haiti deserve clean water and political stability.

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