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Dominican Republic, Conflict

Corruption Obstructs Hope to Improve Poverty Within D.R.

La República Dominicana is a culturally rich and breath-taking country on the island of Hispaniola, located in the Northern Caribbean region. It lays claim to two-thirds of the island, while the other third is occupied by the country of Haiti. The gorgeous scenery that one may come to associate with the Dominican Republic does not, however, speak to the truth of the conflicts that the citizens face: twenty percent of the island's residents live in extreme poverty as a result of the corruption within the country, while more than a third of the country lives on \$1.25 USD per day (The Borgen Project). With a strong emphasis on tourism, the government focuses less on points of income coming from within the country than outside of it. Government officials invest large sums of money into hotels and tourist attractions, so much so that it neglects issues that should be dealt with within the country, such as poverty due to the low wages that many families must use to survive. The emphasis that is placed on tourism over agriculture as a reliable source of income makes the Dominican Republic's economy vulnerable to collapse, due to the high levels of danger and criminal activity that occur (Santana). If these internal issues are not taken into account, poverty levels will ultimately increase as income received from tourism decreases.

For most of the Dominican Republic's history, the economy relied on the exportation of locally grown cash crops, such as sugarcane, tobacco, and coffee. For the past 30 years, however, economic earnings have shifted from that lens to a much different one -- tourism (The World Factbook). The Central Bank of the Dominican Republic has reported revenues received from tourism to be \$4.3 billion USD in 2011 alone, and a 5.1% annual growth rate from 2000 to 2011 (Ministry of Tourism). Despite so much revenue, however, income inequality, high unemployment, and underemployment are just a few of the issues that the Caribbean country faces (The World Factbook). Moreover, the country boasts a 61.16% crime index, making it the 23rd most dangerous country in the world (Numbeo). The Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) warns visitors to exercise extreme caution when visiting the island, and urges them to view the Crime and Safety Report for the Dominican Republic even before doing so. OSAC also reports that the availability of weapons, the use of drugs, and the poor criminal justice system are all factors that play a part in the high level of criminal activity in the country. Although tourists are more often targets for criminal offenses such as theft and homicide, organized crime such as money laundering and drug trafficking occur very often as well.

The average family size in the Dominican Republic is 3.2 persons per household (Population Reference Bureau). Dominican families tend to be very close, caring, and protective of one another, as family is considered a basic staple of society (AFS-USA). Dominican families put emphasis on education and studies before everything else, so many teens and young adults are often found devoting their time to studying and putting in effort to do well in school. Typically, many families live in small, one-floor houses crafted from wooden planks acting as walls and sheets of zinc as the roofing. Dominican cuisine as a whole is a combination of Spanish, African, and Taino influence, with one of the most common dishes being sancocho, which is a stew that usually consists of a combination of various meats and vegetables (Visit Dominican Republic). Families most often receive ingredients for dishes in surrounding markets, or by purchasing them from a vendor along the street. Healthcare is not free in the Dominican Republic, and many citizens find themselves unable to afford out-of-pocket medical expenses due to the low wages that they are paid (Expat). Despite the 14% unemployment rate, approximately 64% of all working-class citizens in the Dominican Republic are employed by the government, while 15% of the workforce is employed in agriculture and 22% works in manufacturing (InterNations). A working-class citizen typically earns 2,710 DOP per month, which is equivalent to \$50.74 USD (Salary Explorer).

Conflict and corruption are both barriers that negatively impact the Dominican Republic's food security. Agriculture provides an important source of income in the Dominican Republic, but it is overshadowed by the amount of money received from tourism as the primary income source. Farmers are not given the same pay and opportunity as workers employed by the government, resulting in lower rural income levels, increased poverty, and reduced economic growth (The World Bank). As of October 2013, the average wage a farmer working in rural Dominican Republic earns is \$13,869 DOP, which is approximately \$258.77 USD (Anker). The attention paid to agriculture by the government pales in comparison to that of tourism within the country. Yearly, the Ministry of Tourism invests over \$45 million USD when promoting the Dominican Republic as a travel destination (The Ministry of Tourism). In 2019, the country boasted an income due to tourism of \$7.7 billion USD (Dominican Today). In contrast, the government receives approximately \$111 million USD from its agricultural sector (The Borgen Project). As a result, investments made to improve the agricultural field hardly make a dent in comparison to the country's overall income, due to the fact that agricultural income is not the government's largest source. This neglect is especially evident in the event of a natural disaster. Crops grown by farmers are often exported to the United States and Canada for profit, such as: cocoa, tobacco, sugarcane, coffee, cotton, rice, beans, potatoes, corn, and bananas (Farmfolio). These important

crops, especially sugarcane and rice, are the most threatened by these disasters, and are often lost to them as well. These catastrophes include: hurricanes, tropical storms, earthquakes, landslides, flooding, and droughts. In June 2004, a devastating flood that hit the island of Hispaniola resulted in the destruction of agricultural land in the rural town of Jimani (NASA Earth Observatory). The Dominican government does not provide farmers with an efficient and appropriate response to these natural occurrences. Instead, the government focuses on foreign income as the main contribution to the country's economy, even in spite of agriculture serving as a large part of the country's income.

Agriculture is impacted by crime and tourism. As crime within the Dominican Republic increases, tourism decreases. In 2019, the death of just nine U.S. tourists caused flight bookings in July and August to decrease 59% in comparison to the same time the previous year. Cancelled bookings from July 1 to 17 increased 45% due to the very same event (Schaal). Of these nine people, one was identified as retired Red Sox player David Ortiz, who was found shot in a bar located in Santo Domingo, the biggest city in the Dominican Republic. It is a magnet for tourism, but with rampant crime such as human trafficking, drug cartels, theft, and sexual assault, it causes tourism to decrease considerably. A decrease in income from tourism puts a large dent in the Dominican economy, which negatively affects agriculture as a result, their second largest source of income (The World Factbook). The lack of government aid allocated to farmers results in: failing farms, unemployed workers, agriculture becoming unreliable, decreased food production, and increased dependence on imports. Unemployment rates would then increase, raising poverty levels and causing more of the country to go hungry. One solution to this problem would be for the government to put more emphasis on agriculture within the Dominican Republic, allowing it to be on par with tourism as its main source of income.

The biggest hindrance to agricultural success within the country is the temperamental weather within rural areas. As storms and inclement weather hit the island, vast amounts of crops are lost. Natural disasters have been proven to take a toll on the country's economy in the past. In 1998, Hurricane George resulted in an economic loss of 16.1% of GDP (The World Bank). Records have also shown the natural disasters affect small farmers more, who take up 72% of farmers within the Dominican Republic and account for 28% of agricultural land (The World Bank).

The government should shift its focus on providing aid when these natural events occur. In order to do this, they may consider partnering with existing agencies so that relief efforts may be shared amongst multiple parties, and not simply be left up to the Dominican Republic to solve on its own. Existing agencies include: the Caribbean Catastrophic Risk Insurance Facility (CCRIF), the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), and various programs funded by the United States Agency of International Development (USAID). Because

the Dominican Republic is one of the United States' most important trading partners (U.S. Embassy), the United States would be willing to assist with any aid needed by the Dominican Republic in the wake of a devastating disaster. Another solution may be to shift tourist attention to agriculture in addition to the many other tropical attractions that the island boasts. In order to do this, the government may request willing farmers to open their land to the public and make the many acres they own and work on more visitor-friendly. Much like the apple orchards and pumpkin patches that one may visit in America, a tourist would be able to partake in traditionally Dominican activities on the land of an authentic farm that can also sell products made with the crops that they grow and process, such as sugarcane and rice. Through the introduction of these new attractions, the Dominican government would be able to generate more tourist income while simultaneously providing farmers with another source of income for themselves and their families.

Another solution may be that the Dominican government simply takes more care when reviewing filed criminal cases. With more action taken towards the large crime rate within the country, the Dominican Republic would be able to ensure the safety of both its citizens and foreign visitors. This would positively impact the country's economy and its reputation for crime, which would then allow the ability for the assistance in improving unemployment rates and poverty in the country. These proposed solutions would hardly impact Dominican citizens who are currently employed by the tourism sector, if at all. Due to the multitude of existing agencies that are able and willing to provide relief when natural disasters destroy farmland, however much aid *does* have to be given by the DR in order to rebuild the land will not be as heavy of a price, since it is shared among these agencies. The Dominican Republic has allies that rely on its agricultural output. These countries cannot afford to see a decrease in their import of cash crops that they cannot grow themselves. Moreover, shifting tourist attention to agriculture would keep Dominicans employed in the tourism sector, whilst also providing more income for the agricultural sector as well. New agencies could be formed in order to help families that own farmland transition to a more visitor-friendly area. This would, of course, cost money in order to do, but the income generated for both sectors in the wake of this reformation would do much more good than harm. Looking at past examples, farmers generally seem to be resistant to a transition into agritourism (BioMed Central). However, this transition can be made smoother through the adoption of new farming technologies. If farmers were given tools and skills to improve the efficiency of their farming in exchange for a transition into agritourism, they would be more inclined to do so. As a result, not only does the income for both sectors increase, this would also solidify the cultural identities of farmers around the Dominican Republic. Agricultural diversification allows for a more prominent rural culture.

Change does not come without struggle. Dominicans all around the world must urge the Dominican government to consider reallocating money and focus on the prominent agricultural

sector within the country. A good democracy must listen to its people, and with enough citizens speaking out for change, it can be achieved. With the proposed solutions, the Dominican Republic may yet be able to salvage its country. An improved economy that focuses less on tourism and takes a holistic approach to the many sources of income at its disposal would greatly decrease the amount of poverty and hunger that is evident on the streets of the tropical country.

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