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Haiti, Foreign Aid

Foreign Aid in Haiti is Damaging the Economy

As a result of the massive earthquake that devastated the country, Haiti made many news headlines in early 2010. Ten years later, the country has seemingly been placed on the backburner in the minds of many American citizens as the news coverage has ceased. In spite of the disregard from much of the population, the United States has consistently been providing millions of dollars in aid each year to the country. This aid was intended to help bolster the economy and kickstart new projects that would allow Haiti to lift its population out of poverty. Although well intended, the United States has actually been doing a disservice to the Haitian population by providing money that is in turn being “lost” in the hands of their government officials. In order to truly make an impactful and sustainable change in Haiti, the United States needs to turn their monetary gifts into educational ones.

Marked as a beautiful travel destination located in the Carribean, the size of Haiti is comparable to that of Massachusetts, yet homes 9.8 million people (“Haiti at a Glance”). Over half of the population is located in rural areas, with agriculture being the main source of jobs (Lawless, Robert, and MacLeod). Although a destination filled with culture, it is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with nearly two-thirds of all citizens living below the poverty line (“Haiti Overview”). Life for Haitians has been difficult after an earthquake in 2010 displaced one-fourth of their population (MacDonald). Because of the displacement, many are living in unhealthy conditions, causing Haiti’s mortality rate to be high. This is because of the increased spread of infectious diseases through unsanitary conditions. The average household is described by Britannica:

“The majority of all rural housing consists of two-room dwellings that have mud walls and floors and roofs that are thatched with local grasses or palm leaves; they may also be constructed with plastic and other materials and roofed with corrugated metal. The windows are pane-less and covered with wooden shutters. There is little furniture. In most such dwellings the kitchen is located outside the living quarters, and there is no electricity or piped water; sanitation facilities often consist of a simple latrine dug at a distance from the house,” (Lawless, Robert, and MacLeod).

Haiti’s average temperature ranges from 70-90 degrees fahrenheit year round, although these temperatures can be affected by elevation (Girault, Antoine, and Ferguson). Because of their geographical placement, the country is very susceptible to natural disasters such as hurricanes and tropical storms, making it difficult for farmers to have consistent production. Only 20% of their land is deemed suitable for agricultural practices, but nearly 40% of it is cultivated to produce their main crops; “Many farmers concentrate on subsistence crops, including cassava (manioc), plantains and bananas, corn (maize), yams and sweet potatoes, and rice,” (Lawless, Robert, and MacLeod). Another crop that farms produce in Haiti is coffee. Being an impoverished country, they still rely heavily on fossil fuels and non-renewable

resources to sustain their way of life; this has caused large scale deforestation (Girault, Antoine, and Ferguson).

It is obvious that the efforts that are being given today in the form of millions of dollars from various countries are making little to no impact on the welfare of Haiti or its people. In order to turn the fate of the country's ever declining wealth around, there must be an investment made into its people. The most sustainable and impactful way to do this is through education. But, in a country where nearly two-fifths of the adult population is illiterate (Lawless, Robert, and MacLeod), with little to no access to formal education in rural areas, the focus should remain on tactile things like building homes, making agriculture practices more sustainable, and tapping into fishing practices. The United States and other private organizations that seek to help Haiti also need to take a hard look at how the money they are donating is being spent, and instead invest in physical materials that can be sent directly to rural areas. This investment in education and rural Haitians will allow the country to become more self-sufficient, relying less on other countries for aid and imported goods.

As 32,000 Haitians still live in displacement camps from the earthquake that struck over a decade ago (MacDonald), there is a desperate need for safe homes. Haiti is lacking skilled professionals that know how to adhere to safety guidelines, but is also facing major unemployment rates and poverty. To solve this, people in rural areas need to be able to become educated. As they do not generally have access to transportation and roads are less than ideal, there needs to be visiting professional personnel that are able to equip local residents with the skills they need to master the construction skills and also teach others. By doing this, a group of professionals could travel around to different rural areas for short bursts of time, but leave a lasting impact in impoverished areas.

Similarly, these practices could also be applied to conservation practices in agriculture. In Haiti, they are doing their environment a disservice by not having the knowledge to implement appropriate practices such as terracing for their geographic area. This is causing high levels of soil erosion and damage to farmable ground, dropping yields to crops. Another tool that could be used to improve farming is proper irrigation. By solving these problems now, soil quality could be preserved for years to come. Again, to achieve the goal of bringing education to those that do not have the means of traveling, several agriculturalists could tour to multiple rural areas where these practices need to take place, teaching local farmers the importance and proper practices in order to become more educated and efficient in their production. The increased production of crops from furthering education would help to support the farming families as well as the local economy through the buying and selling of food crops to others. By improving agriculture practices with coffee beans, Haiti will also gain international trade by allowing them to export more of their main cash crop.

The phrase "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime," has never rang more true for a country. A major untapped potential swimming along the shores of Haiti is the fishing industry. Although untraditional for residents of the country, in order to gain footing on their financial burden and poverty, steps must be taken to integrate it into their culture. The potential

for a thriving industry swims alongside the tuna, marlins, and sardines (Lawless, Robert, and MacLeod). The government will also have to play an active roll in the cultivation of the fishing industry. A current problem that is facing the country in regards to the utilization of the natural resources around the island country is the fact that the Haitian government does not regulate the waters around the country. Being that it is prime territory to fish, other, wealthier countries from nearby deplete the stock of fish, leaving the population of Haiti and the few families that do rely on fishing at a loss. Much like agricultural land on the island, the government must also play a role in the preservation of the costal ecosystem. This will ensure that the practices that they are using are sustainable and will help the country out the most in their long term goal of bringing their population out of poverty. Because of the lack of experience, though, this will be the hardest educational topic that will be “tackled”. Not only will this project require numerous resources that are not already owned, but also a significant amount of time to teach locals the ropes. The increased time spent in coastal villages is counteracted by the fact that those that live inland will not be able to utilize this information, making the number of stops on the educational tour lesser than that of the agriculture tour.

An organization that is already making progress in the advancement of economic development is Church World Service, who has a “Fishing and Farming” initiative already on the ground in Haiti. This organization has worked with Group of Research and Support for Agroecological, Innovative, Durable Development, or GRADAID, to bring agricultural knowledge to the area. These two organizations work together to focus their efforts on the northwest portion of Haiti, which has the lowest income per capita in the country (Focusing on Fishing Families in Haiti). Here, they work with a community of fishermen that are already established in the area. Their plans include providing equipment to those that are apart of this community and also using the locals to educate others about more efficient practices. Being that this community is already established and is working to provide stability to the families that re involved in the fishing industry, this community activity will not only allow them to improve their practices, but also foster a sense of community buy in, and it can be expected that the positive results from this organization’s actions will be sustainable and truly impactful. GRADAID is also taking on their own initiative in Haiti to encourage the government to enact laws that will protect the environment. As an established organization that has had many successful projects in countries around the world, they will start to make waves within the government concerning the agriculture sector of Haiti. Again, this may be hard, as practices that are widely accepted as normal to may have to shift. But, in order for the industry to become more sustainable and therefore more profitable and bring the producers out of poverty, the change is imperative. Most likely, because of the changes that are going to have to occur, it will first look like the country’s economic state is worsening, but as practices are regulated and formers fall into a new way of life, they will be able to reap the benefits of the system in place and prosper.

The aforementioned plans of being able to educate the public of ways that they can improve their own livelihoods and economy are going to be costly. Where will the money for both the educators and the resources come from? The answer lies in the millions of dollars that pour into the country through foreign aid. In the ten years since the 2010 earthquake, Haiti has received thirteen billion dollars in aid (Connor, Tracy, et al.). Even after all of that money was supposed to help them get back on their feet, they are in a worse position now than ever. This is due to the fact that much of this money is being allocated in ways

that there is no long term positive impact for the people. An example of this kind of irresponsible spending would be the investment of money into the Caracol industrial park, which swallowed up over three hundred million dollars, but left Haitians with no means to work (Kushner). To give the power back to the poor, rural population that makes up the majority of the country, there needs to be more money and resources placed directly into their hands. This could be done by directly purchasing supplies with aid dollars instead of the money circulating through the government, ultimately going to attempt to pay off the country's debts. The most efficient way to enact this plan would be to start the work here in the United States with do-good philanthropic and missionary organizations that wish to visit and make an impact in impoverished counties such as Haiti. By relaying the true needs of Haitians to them (education and resources for rebuilding) they can then use their privilege and easy access to education to impact others. This may be done in the capacity of putting missionaries themselves into classes that would teach them the skills that Haiti desperately needs, and then allowing them to travel and teach the citizens there. With them, they could also take building materials and other resources that would completely bypass the ineffective government. The establishment of charities that would be dedicated to providing supplies directly to Haitians would also make a more measurable impact.

No matter how much foreign aid is being poured into rehabilitation efforts, the one way to make a sustainable and positive change that will last for generations, only accumulating in value, is through education. By investing in those that have the ability to complete their own projects that they need, they not only gain skills, but there is also community buy-in present, suggesting that the change will last. Changing the way in which one is able to give is going to be a hard shift, but will allow the best results in the long run. The organizations that are already on the ground providing this kind of lasting support for the citizen of this country need to be recognized and supported by the general population. By doing this, there will be a positive change in the livelihoods of those still living in the devastation of a natural disaster that occurred a decade ago.

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