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### **Haiti: The United States of America's Starving Neighbor**

Through his portrayal of a cynical gas station attendant in The Grapes of Wrath, author John Steinbeck brings forth the lucid statement that “there ain't room enough...for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat.” (Steinbeck 154). However, both extremes do exist in the world, as Steinbeck makes vividly clear in his writing. Enormous wealth and extreme poverty simultaneously mark our global society. A polarized example of this is the contrast between the daily lives of a wealthy American tycoon and a starving Haitian child. Even within the country of Haiti alone, a despicable gap exists between the wealthy and the poor. Military coups, riots, and starvation have plagued Haiti's past. The country, located on the western third of the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean, is the victim of countless hurricanes, floods, landslides, and other natural disasters. This state of both political and environmental turmoil traces back to countless sources, but at the root of all of these issues is one simple fact: Haiti does not have the environmental infrastructure to sustain itself through a time of peace, not to mention the countless catastrophes to which it is so prone. Because of natural resource degradation, Haiti cannot support itself. Thus millions of innocent people survive on insufficient food; they go without adequate housing and sanitation; they pull their children out of school. Throughout history this cycle manifests itself repeatedly. The fact that innocent people live in such a state of squalor less than six hundred miles away from Disney World is not only baffling, it is despicable. This is not to say that the United States and the United Nations ignore the issue: together they have invested millions upon millions of dollars into the welfare of Haiti. However, it is clear that the current relief system does not work.

When first settled, Haiti flourished as a fertile, albeit small, colony under the disputed control of Spain and France. In 1697 France formally seized control of the portion of Hispaniola now known as Haiti and from that point on forced the tiny nation to produce well over its capacity. Haiti's environmental woes date back to the time the nation was a French colony. The practice of large-scale plantation agriculture profoundly impacted the environment; this, coupled with the subsistence farming the slaves were allowed, instigated the soil erosion that continues today (Haiti Britannica). This soil erosion also caused mountain streams --a prime source of water-- to dry up entirely (Haiti Britannica). The French colonials, however, did not care about and did not fully understand the environmental implications of this. They continued to rape the land for higher productivity, spiraling Haiti into a sharp decline. Spurred on by the impacts of racism, imperialism, and France's own revolution, Haiti declared its independence from France in the year 1804. Between that time and the present, countless men have declared themselves “emperor for life,” Haitian society ousts most of these men with military force. Many presidents, dictators, and emperors have been removed from office due to riots that ensue with each hike in food prices. As conditions grow harsher, the people grow angrier. Under such turbulent conditions, no government has ever been able to control the nation long enough to lead it out of the destitute state that the French imperialists left it in.

With over 80% of its population living on less than two dollars a day, Haiti is among the poorest nations in the Americas. Families struggle to fill the bloated bellies of their children (“UN peacekeeper killed”). Due to the lack of food, jobs, or infrastructure, a widespread Diaspora of Haitians has begun. As living conditions continue to decline, thousands of Haitians illegally cross the border into the Dominican Republic. Over one hundred thousand Haitians currently reside in the Dominican Republic (Haiti Britannica). Even more Haitians attempt a marine escape, either to Cuba or the United States. The United States Coast Guard routinely picks up would-be emigrants and returns them to Haiti; countless others

drown en-route to freedom (Haiti Britannica). In total, tens of thousands of Haitians migrate from the nation each year in quest of even a slightly improved life (Haiti Britannica).

Even without political corruption and mass emigration Haiti faces great adversity: natural disasters, in part the fault of man, constantly devastate the country. Within the year of 2008 alone, Haiti has been impacted by a total of four hurricanes, leading to massive flooding, crop failures, and fatalities. Each hurricane that further damages the already nearly decimated country sends Haitians into a heightened state of poverty. Following Hurricane Gustav, 8,700 people were in shelters and running out of food (“Back-to-back storms”). Significant damage is done to crops as well. Because of Haiti’s lack of strong roots to hold soil in place, landslides ravage the fragile environment. The town of Belle Roche, because of its location, bears the brunt of hurricane damage. In this town, six miles of crucial irrigation channels were destroyed and over 2,000 heads of livestock perished in the chaos of Hurricane Gustav (“Back-to-back storms”). Crops that are kept without any shield from hurricane force winds are easily toppled over and razed. Such crop damage instantly hikes up the prices of food. This would severely impact a stable nation; but for Haiti, the impacts are detrimental.

The average Haitian family resides in fleeting shacks of wood, scrap metal, and dirt. The family consists of an absent father, away to find work; four to five uneducated starving children, one or more of whom has been sent away to work for a wealthier family; and a mother who must find some trade with which to sustain the family. Such rural families as these live on a total income of less than four hundred dollars per year. Subsistence farming is the only means of survival for these Haitians. The vast majority of the Haitian population -- 80% of the people-- lives in a general state of squalor. Because of crop failures and the inability to pay for labor, families must pull their children out of school to harvest crops. This prevents the children from having better lives than the miserable ones that their parents have had. An average Haitian only attends six years of school, and these years of education are sporadic at best. However, for the few upper class Haitians, such hardships as finding a way to feed a dying child or to put a roof between the heads of a family and the wrath of a hurricane is unknown. Such difficulties are, as Encyclopedia Britannica puts it, “far removed from the lifestyle of Haiti’s few wealthy elite, who commute from their cool mountainside villas to air-conditioned offices in costly four-wheel-drive vehicles” (Haiti).

When crops fail and Haitians need a quick source of income, they turn to charcoal that is obtained from trees. This practice has resulted in the decimation of Haiti’s forests. Over ninety-eight percent of Haiti’s forests have been eradicated (Bracken). Not only does this loss hold a large stake in climate change, but it also results in the loss of fertile soil and massive landslides. Without thick and long roots to hold soil in place --especially during severe weather-- 15,000 acres of topsoil are washed away each year. In a nation struggling to make its soil produce, this is crippling.

Although conditions in Haiti are appalling, the situation in the Dominican Republic --the nation with which Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola-- is drastically better. The stark difference between the two nations is visibly underscored by the appearance of their border: on Haiti’s side, parched and dusty soil covers the ground; on the Dominican Republic’s side, lush green trees blanket rich and fertile soil. This difference causes such natural disasters as hurricanes to impact Haiti much more harshly; the lack of tree cover is the cause of most crops lost during natural disasters. Trees that have much stronger roots than crops such as maize and rice provide shelter from the wind in the Dominican Republic; whereas in Haiti, weaker crops are left without shelter to face the elements alone.

In addition to causing soil erosion, flash floods, and weak infrastructure, deforestation in Haiti leads to the process of desertification. This results in inaccessible water for the purposes of agriculture. With water continually becoming scarcer as more is allotted to agriculture, few Haitians have access to potable water; in fact, only thirty percent of them do (“North Haiti Environment”). This is due largely in

part to the fact that twenty-five out of thirty watersheds have been denuded (Haiti US Aid). However, turbulent weather conditions add to water scarcity. In the past few years, Haiti has had little rainfall -- except during hurricane season at which point the poor soil is saturated and flooding occurs. These barrages of water obviously do little to satiate Haiti's needs. Haiti's woes in regards to water can also be attributed to deforestation. In the absence of topsoil, the Earth is incapable of absorbing rainfall, leading to excessive flooding. Also, as the result of soil erosion that occurs because of deforestation, silt and boulders choke natural waterways and strain the country's tottering irrigation system (Bracken). The lack of water catalyzes the inability of Haitian farmers to produce marketable crops because farmers cannot keep their crops alive without water; without water the crops wilt and die.

Current attempts at salvaging life in Haiti, while strong in monetary value, are weak in intellectual value. At present, any relief is given to the Haitian government --which is weak-- to distribute to the poor. Some small amounts of money are also distributed sporadically to different causes. Independent organizations that attempt to relieve Haiti's food shortage do not have the means to bring enough aid in to make a significant impact. World Vision International, for example, intended to feed four hundred Haitians immediately following Hurricane Gustav; however, over one thousand refugees showed up looking for food ("Back-to-back storms"). None of these forms of aid help to educate Haitians or prevent the cause of the problem. Current aid is merely a crutch that Haitians rely on. Efficient aid would rehabilitate Haiti, not simply attempt to sustain it. The underlying problem in Haiti is the fact that Haitians simply do not know basic but land-saving farming practices. Without any access to education, this is not likely to change. A simple practice that should be employed by Haitian farmers is the technique of terracing the land on sloped terrain. This is much needed in Haiti as much farmland is in mountainous region. Terracing would help prevent landslides and soil erosion. Haitians need to be taught that the value of a tree extends much further than the income one could make by selling charcoal. Haitians must also learn the importance of potable water, and access to potable water via bio-sand filtration will greatly improve conditions in Haiti.

Farming practices that are currently used in Haiti are archaic as compared to those used in wealthy countries. For obvious financial reasons, such nations as Haiti certainly will not be able to use such tools as tractors, genetically modified crops, or chemical fertilizers and insect repellents. However, there are simple techniques that can go a long way to increasing productivity. While only one-fifth of the land in Haiti should be cultivated, over two-fifths of it is used for agriculture (Haiti Britannica). Much of this risky land use occurs on the slopes of mountains, and farmers in this region do not use the practice of terracing. In one hectare of land, the practice of terracing can prevent the erosion of up to two hundred and fifty tons of topsoil each year (Terraces). Without terracing, up to seventy percent of rainwater simply runs off the eroded soil into the ocean; with the use of terracing, less than ten percent of rainwater is lost in this manner. In a nation starved for water and fertile soil, such a positive impact would be life changing.

At the forefront of Haiti's natural resource degradation is the massive deforestation that has occurred. In order to prevent further soil erosion, an initiative to plant a massive amount of trees is needed. This alone will not work, however, as it has been tried before. The problem is that Haitians cut down new trees quicker than they can be planted. In the past twenty years, the U.S. Agency for International Development has planted approximately 60 million trees, while this should in theory improve Haitian conditions, between 10 and 20 million trees have been cut down each year (Bracken). For this reason, preservation regulations must be put in place and Haitians must be educated on the importance of forests.

Although terracing and reversing the process of deforestation would solve many of Haiti's issues in regards to water, an additional measure must be taken. Haitian farmers lack access to sufficient irrigation systems. Water harvesting is a simple practice that can be employed; it consists of sequestering

excess rainwater during rainy seasons for later use. For Haiti, this system would be ideal because large amounts of water pound the nation at intervals. By storing just a part of this water, Haiti will be able to better irrigate its crops. Although a large-scale water harvesting system may not be feasible, the many subsistence farms of Haiti can each have one; the system is relatively simple and can consist of nothing more than an oil drum with a pipe that has a shut off valve (Water Harvesting). Such system would take much strain off of the environment and off of the Haitian people to conserve water.

Since less than one-third of Haitians have access to drinkable water, there is a pressing need for a cheap and efficient filtration system. An easy and cheap solution to Haiti's water dilemma is the use of bio-sand filters. Each individual filter lasts for approximately twenty years and costs only \$40 (Bio-sand Filter). These filtration systems have already been put to the test in Haiti by various independent organizations and have grown in popularity due to their success. However, there has not been an effort to provide for the large-scale distribution of bio-sand filters: eight thousand filters are currently in use in Haiti (Bio-sand Filter). If an effort were put in place to provide, on a larger scale, these filters, the majority of Haiti would be able to quickly gain access to potable water.

Haiti must additionally be given access to alternative energy. About 71 percent of energy consumption in Haiti comes from charcoal that is made from trees (Bracken). In order to prevent further deforestation, the demand for charcoal needs to be lowered. This in turn will have a positive environmental impact in that it will increase tree population in Haiti and lead to cleaner energy.

In order to receive this assistance from the world community, Haiti must pass benchmarks that should be put in place. Such benchmarks would ensure that the nation creates equality, true democracy, social programs to feed the poor, and an effective education system. All aid money should come from a unified front and must directly benefit the creation or maintenance of terracing, sand dams, tree cover. Any other aid must be approved by the United Nations. This will ensure that relief money is not squandered and that it goes to rehabilitating rather than merely supporting the nation.

The entire nation of Haiti relies heavily on aid from the international community; it will not be able to ignore sanctions coming from a unified front. Both the rich and poor in Haiti need aid money in order to survive. The poor need money to provide food, shelter, and other needs for their families. The wealthy, particularly those in power, need aid to continually flow into the nation because they need a less turbulent lower class in order to remain in power.

Thus, in the backyard of the United States, lies a nation completely encumbered in the exponential wrath of an abused environment. There exists a community that lives primarily in shanties; a people starved for food and justice; a nation buried in its turbulent past --within the distance of a ninety minute flight from Miami or Orlando, the very epitome of greed and gluttony. Because the underdeveloped nation of Haiti was never taught to terrace its land, to conserve its trees and water, to cherish its natural assets, the nation spirals further into a state of squalor. Simply throwing more and more money in relief to this nation clearly is not enough: this is the policy the international community has adhered to in the past and Haiti is no better off for it. To end the mess of starvation, destitution, and revolts, the Haitians must not only be fed but taught to feed themselves. Such techniques as terracing sloped terrain, filtering water with bio-sand filters, accessing alternative energy, and educating the masses are crucial in salvaging this wrecked nation. Such simple techniques will save countless lives and improve the quality of others. Haitians must be taught simple but effective farming methods that will allow them to withstand political turmoil or turbulent tropical weather.

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