

Haiti's Background

Haiti's population is over 7,000,000. 50% of all children die before they reach the age of 15. 50% of the people cannot read and write. An estimated 65 percent of the population lives in poverty; in rural areas that number is about 80 percent. These people, many of whom farm small plots of poor mountain land, are often malnourished. Infant mortality is 74 per 1,000 births, life expectancy at birth is only 52 years, and the incidence of diseases ranging from intestinal parasites to (AIDS) is extremely high. Only about 46 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water, and only 28 percent has access to sanitary sewer systems. A limited elite of about 10 percent, mostly professionals, enjoys a sophisticated, affluent lifestyle. This elite class has traditionally resisted all attempts to restructure the Haitian social system. The majority of Haitians live in poverty with little education, few opportunities for employment, and limited political influence.

Haiti's economy has been shrinking since the early 1980s while the population has continued to grow. In 2002 Haiti's per capita gross domestic product was \$410. This placed Haiti among the world's poorest nations. Agriculture employs 51 percent of the labor force; manufacturing, services, and tourism are the next largest employers. Formal unemployment affects about 50 percent of the labor force. It is estimated unemployment combined with underemployment affect about 85 percent of the labor force.

Most of Haiti's farmers work subsistence plots of land that produce small amounts of cash crops. Soil erosion and overworked land are major agricultural problems, while hurricanes and drought have also taken their toll. Coffee, sugarcane, sisal, and fruit are the major commercial crops, while beans, rice, corn, and sorghum are the main food crops. Coffee is the major agricultural export. Chickens are the most common livestock, but cattle, goats, and pigs are also raised.

Only 3.2 percent of Haiti is forested. The rate of energy consumption in Haiti is among the lowest in the world. Poor Haitians use charcoal to supply energy for home use.

Industrial wages of less than \$2 per day are the lowest in the Caribbean. There is only one physician for every 15,064 inhabitants, and medical facilities are poor. Malaria, dengue, intestinal parasites, yaws, AIDS, and other infectious diseases are common. Nearly 80 percent and nearly two-thirds of the population is malnourished.

Haiti's average income is the lowest in the Western Hemisphere. The lack of unemployment opportunities remains one of the most critical problems facing the economy along with soil erosion and political instability. There is a shortage of skilled labor and an abundance of unskilled. Haiti's finances rely mostly on overseas aid.

French is one of the two official languages, but only spoken by about 10% of the people. All Haitians speak Creole, the other official language.

Haitians place a high value on education, however most families cannot afford to send their children to school. Only 63% of those enrolled will complete primary school. On average it takes 16 years to produce a single graduate of the six year cycle.