Environmental and Economic Elements of the Haitian Crisis

Once the most prosperous colony of France in the New World, Haiti is now the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. For some, one explanation for this drastic change is simple—Haiti is not under French rule anymore. For others, possible explanations are more complex: Could there be a cause and effect relationship between Haiti’s wealth in the 18th-century as a French colony and her abject economic situation as a sovereign nation today? Could the interplay of physical, political, social, and economic factors that produced one situation at one point in time create a completely different situation at another time? Could processes be isolated throughout Haiti’s history that account for her situation today? Rather than approaching these questions from an historical perspective, I will outline some of the key issues within Haiti’s economic structure that are at the core of the current situation.

Even to the neophyte researcher, Haiti’s current environmental and economic situation is distressing. Completely covered with dense tropical forests when Europeans arrived in 1492, the country is now a mosaic of bare, eroded landscapes interspersed with original forest patches on only 2% of its land. With an annual population growth rate of 1.9% and a mean population of 214 persons per square kilometer (one of the highest in Latin America) pushing relentlessly against fixed, steep-sloped land for their basic subsistence, Haiti today can no longer feed itself, despite its agrarian economy.

Seventy-three percent of the Haitian population lives below the poverty level. Seventy percent of the population resides in rural areas, practicing rain-fed and dry farming that earns an average of US $50 annually. Eighty percent of Haiti’s domestic energy supply depends on firewood and charcoal production, and as a result, the country’s levels of deforestation and soil erosion are alarmingly high. A recent report states that 36.6 million tons of top soil on average—0.6% of Haiti’s total agricultural production value—are lost annually due to deforestation and soil erosion. The cumulative effects of these environmental problems—caused primarily by domestic biomass consumption, poor farming techniques, and a growing population—have had disastrous consequences on the overall Haitian economy. These consequences are expressed in terms of: a) declining agricultural productivity and agricultural exports performance, falling rural incomes, and increasing dependence on food imports; b) increasing power outage and electricity rationing throughout the country due to the silting of Haiti’s major hydroelectric facility, the Péliger Haiti Dam; c) increased flooding in urban areas, changing local rainfall patterns, and increased silting of irrigation canals; d) massive migration from rural areas to Port-au-Prince and the neighboring countries of the Dominican Republic, the lesser Antilles islands, and the U.S.; and e) deteriorating current account balance and mounting external debt.

Clearly, Haiti’s current levels of environmental degradation and demographic growth are limiting factors constraining the growth of agricultural productivity, with deleterious side effects nationwide. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to assume that population growth and environmental degradation are the only internal factors underlying Haiti’s poor economic situation. Other factors to consider include pervasive political instability, inequitable distribution of wealth, skewed distribution of arable land, insecure land tenure system, inefficient allocation of resources, and poorly-defined or inappropriate macroeconomic and sectoral policies. In many respects these factors are illustrative of large discrepancies—symptoms of policy and market failures—within Haiti. Discrepancies exist between: a) rights and responsibilities, due to the failure of Haiti’s judicial system to secure property rights and to enforce social contracts and laws in general; b) actions and consequences due to governmental corruption, political myopia, mismanagement, and government unwillingness to provide much needed leadership in technology generation and transfer; c) scarcity of natural resources and their external market price due to the Haitian government’s inability and/or lack of commitment in monitoring and restricting the use of natural resources, such as the country’s remaining forested areas.

These discrepancies—which flourished especially during the last three decades of the Duvalier administrations—created incentives that, from a governmental perspective, legitimized short-term, shortsighted economic considerations over long-term ones, and prevented elected officials from taking measures to effectively address the environmental degradation of Haiti’s rural landscape and the worsening economic conditions of the country’s rural population. These incentives also enabled public authorities to pursue personal enrichment (the plundering of state treasury) at the expense of the Haitian masses. Negligent care of remaining natural resources allowed poor squatters to farm state-owned forested and marginal lands, and over-exploit these resources.

These misguided incentives, coupled with population growth and the abject poverty of Haiti’s rural masses, are at the core of the country’s economic stagnation and environmental degradation. To correct these incentives, it is imperative for economic planners and policy makers to redefine Haiti’s policy options and rethink the state’s role as an agent of intervention in economic life. This will not be an easy task, since the Haitian state has traditionally represented the interests of the elite and foreign powers. In the following months, with the return of President Aristide, it will be interesting to see how Haiti’s state apparatus—characterized by many researchers as ‘predatory’ and ‘the main obstacle to Haiti’s economic development’—will be transformed into the country’s primary instrument for economic recovery.

This article, written by IUB School of Public and Environmental Affairs doctoral candidate René W. Aubourg of Haiti, is reprinted courtesy of the Newsletter of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies.