

Country profile

World Vision

Haiti

GEOGRAPHY

Haiti occupies the western third of Hispaniola, which is the second-largest island in the Caribbean Sea. A mountainous country, its name means “high land” in the local Taino language. The climate is generally tropical but is more temperate in the highlands. Due to the rapid clearing of Haiti’s forests, much of the landscape is now barren. Haiti has two distinct peninsulas, the northern and southern, separated by the Golfe de la Gonave. Hurricanes and flash floods occur periodically, placing pressure on Haiti’s infrastructure and population. Haiti is densely populated and is home to more than 10 million people in an area less than half the size of Tasmania.

PEOPLE

Most Haitians are descendants of West African peoples who were brought to Haiti to work as slaves on the sugar plantations. Most people speak Creole, which is a blend of French and African languages. However, a minority of educated and wealthy people speak French. Most Haitians are Roman Catholics but Protestant churches also have considerable support. A small percentage of people claim to practise voodoo, which combines elements from many African religions; however it is believed that many more practise voodoo than is officially stated.

HISTORY

The Taino and Arawak people lived peacefully as farmers and fishermen for centuries before Columbus landed in Haiti in 1492. When Spanish colonists arrived they soon enslaved the indigenous people, whose population fell from an estimated half a million to fewer than 500.



Improving access to educational opportunities is an important focus of our work with Haitian communities.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries,
The University of Texas at Austin

Large-scale cultivation of sugar cane in the early 1500s led to the importing of slaves from West Africa. The French attacked the island in the late 1600s and gained control of its western third. French plantation owners became accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle that was made possible by exploiting their black slaves.

Inspired by news of the French Revolution, Haiti’s slaves revolted in 1791 and drove out the colonists. The French sent troops and regained the island briefly, but in 1804 Haiti became the first slave colony in the world to gain independence.

The next 110 years saw a succession of dictators ruling in Haiti. From 1957, Haiti suffered nearly 30 years of ruthless rule under Dr Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude with their feared secret police, the Tontons Macoutes. After Jean-Claude Duvalier’s exile and several short-lived governments, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Roman Catholic priest who promised a better deal for the poor, became the first democratically elected president in 1990. Since then Haiti has had an unstable political life marked by violence and significant economic problems.

ECONOMY

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and its economy has been shaped by years of inequality. The massive gap in wealth between the Creole-speaking majority and the French-speaking minority remains a serious problem.

Unemployment and underemployment are also major issues, with an estimated two-thirds of the labour force without formal jobs. Often, those who are employed work long hours, under tough conditions and are usually on low wages. Taking advantage of these conditions, cheap manufactured goods are exported to the United States. However, output is frequently disrupted by failures in the electricity and water supply.

Agriculture employs more than half of the workforce, even though less than 20 percent of the land is suitable for farming. Farmers struggle to grow maize, rice, millet and beans on small plots, using basic tools such as hoes and machetes. Natural disasters such as hurricanes and droughts reduce crop yields, and as a result much of Haiti's food has to be imported. Water shortages continue to have a devastating impact on the overall health and livelihoods of Haiti's people.

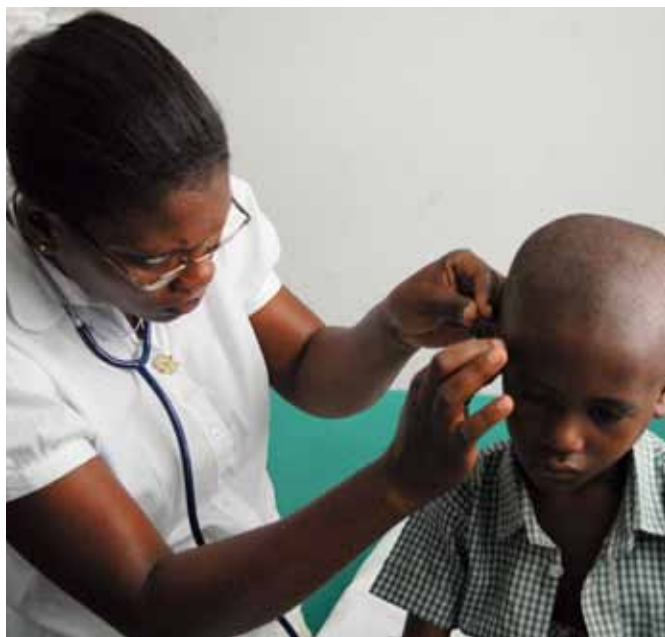
LIVING CONDITIONS

While the wealthiest one percent controls almost half of the national revenue, an estimated 55 percent live in extreme poverty, unable to afford their basic needs. Many rural families live in mud brick houses, without access to safe drinking water, healthcare services and sanitation. As a result, children suffer from preventable diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria.

Health and education services are concentrated in the capital, Port-au-Prince, even though 48 percent of Haitians live in rural areas. HIV and AIDS is also a major issue in Haiti.

The rapid and wide scale clearing of forests has dramatically increased erosion and flooding. This has depleted the soils and reduced crop yields, taking a heavy toll on farmers and their families. As a result, many children are not meeting their nutritional requirements, which results in chronic malnutrition.

Disaster struck Haiti in January 2010, when the capital Port-au-Prince was hit by earthquake. Up to 300,000 people were killed and infrastructure was devastated, leaving 1.5 million people living in makeshift camps, dependent on aid for survival.



Many children living in poor communities suffer from preventable illnesses including diarrhoea and malaria.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	HAITI	AUSTRALIA
Population	10.2 million	21.5 million
Urban population	52.1%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$949	\$38,692
Population with an improved water source	63%	100%
Adult literacy rate	61%	99%
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	54.9%	0%
Under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	72	6
Life expectancy at birth	61.7 years	81.9 years

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

EDUCATION

Although education is compulsory, many children (especially girls) do not go to school because their help is needed at home. Others do not complete their studies due to poor facilities and a lack of qualified teachers.

Many people have fled to the United States, though most have been refused entry. Others cross illegally into the Dominican Republic and work for meagre wages on sugar plantations. As long as poverty and violence continue, there will be people who look for a better future elsewhere.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN HAITI

- child sponsorship is supporting children, their families and communities through improved access to things like education, healthcare and clean water supplies;
- emergency relief is provided for people affected by hurricanes, flood and drought, and most recently the January 2010 earthquake;
- projects provide agricultural production training, farm inputs and technical assistance;
- environmental protection and education are encouraged.