

GOOD INTENTIONS AND FALSE REPRESENTATIONS: HOW U.S.  
HUMANITARIAN AID CULTIVATES DEPENDENCY IN HAITI

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## *Abstract*

An estimated US\$13 billion in humanitarian aid was pledged by the international community to benefit Haiti in the wake of the earthquake that devastated the island nation on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Despite this huge sum of money, Haiti has shown very little growth in the seven years that have passed, and most of the country still lives in extreme poverty. Although some media outlets and scholars have questioned where all this money has gone and what humanitarian aid has actually accomplished in Haiti, the issue has not received nearly as much scholarly attention as it deserves. This thesis will contribute to a growing body of literature addressing the question of what kind of role humanitarian aid and the discourse surrounding humanitarian aid have on development in developing countries by focusing solely on post-earthquake Haiti. It argues that American non-governmental organizations operating in Haiti and U.S. governmental regulations regarding food aid cultivate Haiti's dependence on humanitarian aid. First, the study will analyze the effect of large NGOs on the lives of Haitians through a case study of the American Red Cross by exploring primary source documents. Second, the study will analyze USAID's affect on both Haiti and Haitians by focusing on the use of American food aid. Lastly, Giorgio Agamben's distinction between 'bare life' and 'political life' will be applied to post-earthquake media coverage to better understand how public perceptions of Haiti alter the discourse surrounding its current state of poverty. Overall, this thesis finds that U.S. humanitarian aid, both private and public, handicaps Haiti's economic growth if dispersed over long periods of time, therefore cultivating conditions of dependency on Western donors. The current discourse in America regarding Haiti also plays a role in reinforcing these conditions by creating a narrative that portrays Haiti as an object of charity.

## *Introduction*

*Se nan chimen jennen yo kenbe chwal malen  
If you want to catch a wild horse, find a tight corral.*

Humanitarian aid, in the way it's utilized today, is not the answer to global poverty.

In a world in which aid is used almost instinctively in response to natural and humanitarian crises, a statement like this seems counterintuitive. The problem, of course, is not the alleged end goals of humanitarian aid, but rather with the way it is implemented – it simply doesn't work. Think about it: try to name a developing country that has received so much foreign aid that it was completely lifted out of poverty. After so many decades spent pouring so many billions of dollars into the developing world, wouldn't common sense tell us that these countries would look somewhat different?

No country embodies the failures of humanitarian aid more so than Haiti. With the highest concentration of foreign-based NGOs in the world and consistently ranking among the top ten recipients of U.S. food aid, most Haitians still live in unimaginable poverty (CHRGJ 2012, 5). According to the World Bank, 71 percent of Haitians live in poverty (less than US\$3.10 per day), and 54 percent live in abject poverty (less than US\$1.90 per day). So why are there still such extreme levels of poverty in Haiti even with so much humanitarian activity?

If one wants to know why Haiti is in the shape it's in today, it is imperative to understand it in its historical context. American news coverage about Haiti often mentions its unofficial last name as “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere” but

fails to explore the reasons why this is so. It is a country with a truly exceptional history, marked by colonialism, perseverance, foreign intervention, brutish regimes, and injustice.

Haiti is a land of firsts: Haitians gained independence through the first and only successful slave revolt in history and became the first independent black republic in the Western Hemisphere. Some also argue that it simultaneously became the first “Third World” nation in a traditional sense, as they began their journey as a sovereign country extremely poor and handicapped by debt (Edmonds 2012, 441). The Haitians’ incredible realization of their independence from France in 1804 was immediately marred by international contempt. Colonial powers of the time (primarily France and the United States) were fearful that Haiti would set a dangerous precedent for their own slave populations and decided to limit it in its infancy through financial institutions.

In 1825, completely isolated from the rest of the world and under threat of the French navy on their coastline, Haiti was forced to take out a loan from a French bank of 90 million gold francs in order to compensate the French military for damages during the rebellion and French plantation owners for “property loss.” This high price even included the Haitians’ own physical bodies, since slaves were widely viewed as property in the eyes of colonizers. It took Haiti 122 years and \$21 billion (in current U.S. dollars) to pay off their freedom. In 1947, 140 years after the abolition of the slave trade and a year after the Nazis were convicted of their crimes (including slavery), Haitians were still literally paying for their freedom in cash (Phillips 2008, 6).

The long-term impacts of this debt, while certainly not the only reason for Haiti’s chronic poverty today, cannot be overestimated. For a country of recently freed slaves who had essentially no assets and no connections to global trade, this debt would hinder

them long after they finally finished paying it off. Since most of their revenue went directly to French banks, the Government of Haiti was unable to invest heavily in their infrastructure (including schools and hospitals), nor could they provide meaningful services to their citizens. In 1915, for example, 80 percent of the government's revenue was spent on debt service (Edmonds 2012, 441). The injustice of this debt can still be felt in Haiti today; in the country's formative years, when the government should have been heavily investing in education, agriculture, and industry, they were using most of their money to pay for their freedom. Haiti has also experienced American military occupation, widespread political turmoil induced by foreign intervention, three decades of brutal dictatorships.

Haiti has become a synonym for poverty and natural disaster in the minds of many. However, Haiti's violent and unique history explains much more about the state the country is in today than it's supposedly unlucky geography. Similarly to how black families in America have faced systemic obstacles in accumulating intergenerational wealth over time (such as segregation, redlining, and discrimination), leading to present-day wealth inequality, Haiti has faced systemic obstacles in accumulating wealth on a national scale from the very beginning of its existence, which has led to the global inequalities we can observe today.

Needless to say, neither Haitians nor the Government of Haiti were prepared for the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck the country on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010. It was the single deadliest natural disaster in Haiti's long history of disasters, and it occurred only six miles from the surface of the earth and ten miles from Port-Au-Prince, the most densely populated part of the country. Out of a population of only around 10 million

people, the earthquake left 220,000 dead (including 25 percent of the government's civil service), and 1.5 million Haitians were immediately rendered homeless. The cost of the damages overall was estimated to be around US\$7.8 billion – an amount of money far greater than Haiti's entire GDP the previous year (Ramachandran and Walz 2015, 30).

The scale of destruction eclipsed all other news among the international community and immense amounts of foreign aid, the developed world's go-to solution for any natural disaster or humanitarian crisis, soon began to pour in. According to the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti, there was a total of US\$13.34 billion in international aid pledged to Haiti in response to the 2010 earthquake. International leaders ambitiously declared that they were going to use this money to help Haiti “build back better,” and common sense would tell us that this huge sum of money, worth far more than the \$7.8 billion in damages, would be more than enough to achieve this goal.

However, seven years and billions of dollars later, Haiti still looks remarkably similar to how it did in 2010. The death toll from Hurricane Matthew on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 topped 1,000 in Haiti (in comparison to roughly 46 in the United States and 4 in the Dominican Republic), and American citizens still continue to see headlines such as “Desperate Haitians living in caves, eating toxic plants in post-hurricane Haiti” (Charles 2017). According to the World Bank, Haiti's GDP per capita in 2015 was US\$818 (in current U.S. dollars). Seventy five percent of Haiti's urban population lives in slums, and the entire country holds a literacy rate of only 61 percent. What happened to “building back better?” If there has been so much humanitarian activity in Haiti for so long, why is there still so much poverty?

These are the primary questions that this thesis addresses. This study will examine how humanitarian aid affects Haitians and why there has not been much progress, despite the huge scale of humanitarian activity. It consists of three main parts. The first part analyzes the effect of large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the charitable feelings of American citizens on the lives of Haitians through a case study of the American Red Cross. The second part will analyze how American regulations regarding the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) affect both Haiti and Haitians by focusing on the use of American food aid. Lastly, Giorgio Agamben's distinction between 'bare life' and 'political life' will be applied to post-earthquake media coverage to better understand how American public perceptions of Haiti alter the discourse surrounding its current state of poverty.

However well intentioned these organizations and institutions might be, humanitarian aid as a whole is actually detrimental to Haiti's realization of true sovereignty and props up the very inequalities that it claims to eliminate. This thesis argues that not only do American non-governmental organizations operating in Haiti and U.S. governmental regulations regarding food aid cultivate Haiti's dependence on humanitarian aid, but also that the current discourse in America regarding Haiti plays a key role in reinforcing this dependence by creating a narrative that portrays it as an object of charity. American citizens are therefore complicit, at some level, in replicating these global inequalities – either by donating to popular NGOs or by simply paying their taxes. The goal of this thesis is to simply highlight and question the structural global inequalities that produce such vastly different outcomes for people living in different countries, as well as to challenge the idea that aid is the answer to every humanitarian

crisis, by both asking and answering the question: does humanitarian action truly help those that are most in need?

*Part I: Good Intentions*

*Bel dan pa di zanmi.*

*Just because someone is smiling at you doesn't mean they're your friend.*

The earthquake of January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 overshadowed everything else in the mind of the American public. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center shortly afterwards, 70 percent of those surveyed said that the earthquake is the news story they are talking about with friends, and 60 percent indicated that they were following news from Haiti “very closely” (Pew Research Center 2010). Harrowing images of death and destruction in Haiti broke the hearts of Americans everywhere, and many immediately opened up their wallets to help. In the same study, the Pew Research Center estimated that half of all American households donated money to Haiti; as of January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 18 percent of those surveyed said that at least one person in their household had already donated, while another 30 percent said they planned to donate. American citizens alone donated \$1.4 billion through 60 of the biggest charitable organizations in the U.S. (Chronicle of Philanthropy 2012). There was one NGO, however, that raised far more money than any other: the American Red Cross.

The American Red Cross is often the go-to charity for most Americans in the case of humanitarian crises and natural disasters, both foreign and domestic. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti was clearly no different. The American Red Cross alone raised a grand total of US\$488 million to save lives, kicking off the largest single-country relief operation in global Red Cross history and constituting “one of it’s most successful fundraising events ever” (Sullivan 2015). Americans could donate more easily than ever before with the organization’s new texting campaign – by texting “HAITI” to 90999, a

\$10 donation would be added to their phone bill. Of the \$488 million, an unprecedented \$32 million was raised through \$10 text messages alone. With all this money, American Red Cross President and CEO Gail McGovern promised to help build Haiti back even better than it was before, and that 91 cents of every dollar donated would go directly to the Haitian people.

Most of their promises were never made realities.

The American Red Cross is the largest of thousands of NGOs operating in Haiti (CEPR 2012). Haiti has one of the highest concentrations of non-governmental organizations per capita in the world – even though no one actually knows exactly how many are there. To find the “official” number, one can easily look to the Government of Haiti’s own Ministère de la Planification et de la Coopération Externe (Ministry of Planning and External Cooperation, or MPCE). Haiti’s constitution actually requires every foreign NGO in the country to register with the MPCE, who has the power to approve or deny its status (Schuller 2007, 98). As of May 2017, there were 605 NGOs that were officially recognized by the Government of Haiti listed on the MPCE’s website. In reality, this number is much larger. Edmond Mulet, the former head of the UN mission in Haiti (commonly called MINUSTAH), has estimated that there were at least 10,000 NGOs in Haiti even before the 2010 earthquake. If this is true, then there is could be close to one NGO operating in Haiti per square mile of land (Haiti only spans 10,714 square miles, an area slightly smaller than the state of Hawaii).

Although these organizations range in size and scope of activity, such a high concentration of them has a substantial impact on everyday life in Haiti. NGOs provide 80 percent of Haiti’s basic services, and 70 percent of health care in rural areas (Dupuy

2010, 195). This means unelected foreigners are making around 80 percent of the decisions regarding basic human rights across the entire country, including who will receive medical attention, what areas will get access to clean water, when food will be distributed, and where temporary shelters will be built. This is why Haitians often refer to their own country as a Republic of NGOs.

Take the case of the Red Cross' LAMIKA Program, for example. LAMIKA, an acronym in Creole for "A Better Life in My Neighborhood," was supposed to take place in Campeche, an area in the neighborhood of Carrefour-Feuilles (near Port-Au-Prince), which was one of the areas most heavily affected by the earthquake. According to Campeche's community leaders, the Red Cross came in 2012 and promised their neighborhood not only hundreds of new homes, but a water sanitation system and a health clinic as well (Sullivan 2015). Internal Red Cross documents regarding the LAMIKA project prove that 700 houses were supposed to be built in the area by January 2013 (American Red Cross 2012, 36). There were minimum design requirements listed for each one, including one toilet and one shower, and someone somewhere along the way had even been thoughtful enough to include a section about cultural aspects they should take into consideration while building, such as "Haitians live in group-oriented societies," it is important to "[choose] materials that Haitians are familiar with and will support the local economy," and that it is of "utmost importance that these houses are accepted by their inhabitants" (American Red Cross 2011, 14).

The problem is that none of the houses were ever built. In fact, despite raising almost half a billion dollars, the American Red Cross only managed to build six permanent homes throughout the entire country (Elliot 2015).

The idealistic language in the documents stands in stark contrast to the reality on the ground today. When NPR and ProPublica went to Haiti to investigate the project in 2015, they found residents in Campeche frustrated, confused, and still living in tents with no running water in sight. One of the community's leaders said that "the Red Cross has not intervened here at all" and that they had asked the organization multiple times what was going on without ever getting an answer (Sullivan 2015). They were all completely shocked to learn about both the project's \$24 million budget and that the Red Cross was due to leave the area completely by June 2016.

To this day, Campeche looks essentially the same as it did after the 2010 earthquake. The Red Cross ended up scaling back the LAMIKA program to almost nothing; the program ended having built a single road and repaired a few homes, walkways, and schools (Sullivan 2015). Haitians there still live mostly in shacks made of tarp and corrugated metal, with no access to clean, running water.

Just by itself, the LAMIKA program illustrates many of the problems that come along with large-scale development projects planned by NGOs, such as a lack of development experience, lack of transparency to both beneficiaries and donors, an inefficient use of funds, an ignorance of local culture, and an unwillingness to cooperate with either the Government of Haiti or Haitian people. The main problem observed here, however, is the Red Cross' lack of accountability to the Haitian people. Their ability to choose when to show up, when to leave, where to work, what projects to work on, and what projects to leave unfinished not only demonstrates how unaccountable they are to local communities, but also directly undermines the Government of Haiti's ability to plan and prioritize for their own people.

Notice that there's one thing in common with each of these problems: the Red Cross doesn't actually have to fix any of them. They don't actually have to carry out their projects if they choose not to; they don't have to be accountable to their beneficiaries; they don't have to be transparent to anybody. At the end of the day, they are still a private organization. Most people would like to think that it's the Red Cross' moral imperative to fix problems such as these, but with an organization this extensive, this is far too much to hope for. These problems have become so serious that there is a growing call to actively avoid donating to the American Red Cross among Haitians and Haitian-Americans on social media platforms (Holley 2016). LAMIKA is just one example of an American Red Cross project; the American Red Cross, in turn, is just one example of an NGO among thousands in Haiti. Needless to say, every one of these issues is quite common.

Many of these problems are compounded by the overall structure in which NGOs operate, which creates an environment where they are constantly competing against one another for funding. Only 30 percent of funding for NGOs in Haiti comes from individual and corporate donations. The other 70 percent actually comes from USAID and other government agencies, rendering the term 'non-governmental organization' something of a misnomer (Hallward 2007, 179). This is due in large part to the passage of the Dole Amendment by the U.S. Congress in 1995, which effectively barred the U.S. Government from giving any aid directly to the Government of Haiti. Ostensibly, it was because Congress was concerned about corruption within the Government of Haiti; in reality, it had much more to do with American domestic politics.

This one amendment has affected Haiti enormously; because direct foreign aid was no longer an option, USAID began directing its funds through NGOs and

humanitarian aid organizations that soon sprang up all over Haiti. This quickly became a trend among other Western nations as well. These state-level donors actually have quite a bit of an impact on NGO activity on the ground, particularly in Haiti. This means that these organizations aren't just competing for \$10 donations – they're competing for huge grants and large-scale government contracts. NGOs are being increasingly rewarded by donors (like USAID) for implementing donors' policies, carrying out projects that can be easily publicized, and maximizing the numbers of people they have "helped," rather than basing their activity on local need (Schuller 2012, 175). Donor policies also contribute to the Government of Haiti's exclusion from development projects and NGO activity; more often than not, donors actually encourage NGOs to disregard the authority of the state (Schuller 2012, 176).

There are many Americans who contend that the current system of channeling aid through NGOs is still better than giving it directly to the Government of Haiti, which is corrupt and unstable. However, I would argue that by choosing to channel money through NGOs rather than the Government of Haiti, American foreign aid is inhibiting Haitians' right to live in a sovereign, democratic state. The Government of Haiti has very few resources because of the country's history, and Haiti will never be able to flourish if it is only allowed to function with a government that provides a mere 20 percent of the country's basic services.

Another significant problem with the way NGOs operate is that they tend to do so in the long term, under the assumption that they will always be needed by their beneficiaries. Looking critically at the end goal of humanitarian action easily proves this notion. In its most simplistic form, most everyone would agree that the end goal of

humanitarian aid is to help those in need. If we take this goal to its logical conclusion, the end goal of NGOs should be to create an environment in which they aren't needed at all. It's not hard to see how counterintuitive this is – there is no way an entire sector of workers would want to intentionally want to put themselves out of work, no matter how good their intentions are.

The problem with this is that it undermines human rights in Haiti at the most fundamental levels and creates conditions of dependency on charity throughout the country. For example, if an NGO gives a Haitian neighborhood temporary shelters that will last three to five years without a plan to transition to permanent housing, that makes the residents there dependent again on charity for more housing sometime within the next five years, and therefore dependent on the charitable feelings of benevolent donors. If an NGO pays for a truck to take potable water to a rural village every week without cooperating with the Government of Haiti or working on installing a water sanitation system, then this makes the entire village automatically dependent on the NGO for water. In the end of the day, Haitians remain dependent on the NGOs for basic services. And if any of the organizations decide to leave – since they aren't accountable to the Haitian people – local communities are left with no alternatives, thereby depriving them of their basic human rights to food, water, and shelter.

Sure, Haiti's situation is compounded by internal corruption and political instability, issues that NGOs did not go there to tackle for themselves. But in a small country with 10,000 foreign actors functioning independently, many of which are quite powerful, all this extra activity is sure to promote incoherence within Haiti. At the very

least, their actions don't alleviate poverty there, as illustrated by the lack of Haiti's economic growth and poor standards of living.

In order for NGOs to actually be oriented towards human rights, they must work towards building self-sustaining communities. The realization of the human rights of every person should be their end goal, but as of the way they operate right now this is far from the truth. Haiti is just this generation's prime example of the failure of the humanitarian aid system and the distortion of good intentions. Haitians deserve the right to self-determination just as much as anyone else, and the way most NGOs operate today denies them that right. If NGOs fail to help Haitians in the long run, they contribute to and cultivate conditions in which Haitians are left to be dependent on case-by-case charity. By cutting the Government of Haiti out of the picture as well, American foreign aid is denying Haitians their right to a thriving democratic society under a government that is accountable to their needs, therefore furthering their dependency on the very aid that inhibits them.

*Part II: Foreign Regulations*

*Sak vid pa kanp.*

*An empty sack can't stand up.*

Haiti has been receiving food aid for close to 60 years; the World Food Programme alone has been operating there since 1969 (CHRGJ 2012, 10). Even so, around 50 percent of Haiti's population is undernourished, and 30 percent of children suffer from chronic malnutrition (USAID 2017). It was also ranked 108 out of 113 countries in the Global Food Security Index in 2016, indicating that it is still one of the most food insecure countries in the world. So, why would a country that has received food aid for so long still go hungry on a daily basis?

The problem lies in the way food aid is regulated in the United States. The U.S. is the single largest provider of food aid in the world, accounting for approximately half of all donations provided to alleviate hunger in developing countries each year (WFP 2013, 11). The vast majority of U.S. food aid is through Title II of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Food for Peace Program (CHRGJ 2012, 5).

When Public Law 480 originally established the Food for Peace Program in 1954, it consisted of three components: Title I (Economic Assistance and Food Security), Title II (Emergency and Private Assistance Programs), and Title III (Food for Development). Titles I and III, the two programs that were actually implemented by governments of developing countries, are no longer regularly funded, making Title II the largest food aid program in the U.S. Title II essentially gives the executive branch (including USAID, which falls under the authority of the State Department) the ability to buy American farm products and donate them to NGOs and the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). Once

in the hands of NGOs and the WFP, the food can be distributed in one of two ways: in-kind donations to vulnerable populations, or through monetization. Monetization is the process through which NGOs sell the food they receive from USAID on the Haitian market in order to cover some of their operating or administrative costs.

While most of this sounds fine on the surface, the regulations surrounding food aid do considerable damage to Haiti’s agricultural sector, to the greatest detriment of poor Haitian farmers. U.S. law requires that:

- all agricultural commodities must be grown in the United States;
- at least 50 percent of U.S. food aid must be shipped on U.S. vessels; and
- at least 15 percent of nonemergency food aid funding must be made available to qualifying NGOs for monetization (Schnepf 2016, 2).

Because Title II food aid is limited to agriculture grown in the United States, this leaves very few options for local or regional purchase of food throughout USAID. As observed in Table 1 below, the U.S. is the one donor that utilizes far more domestically grown crops than any other.

*Table 1: Delivery Mode for Food Aid from the Top Food Donors in 2008.*

Donor	Direct Transfer	Local and Regional Purchase
The Netherlands	0%	100%
Australia	0%	100%
United Kingdom	0.06%	99.04%
United Nations	1%	99%
Saudi Arabia	2%	98%
Germany	4%	96%
European Community	14%	86%
Canada	44%	56%
Japan	45%	55%
United States	95%	5%

*Source: Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, Partners in Health, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, and Zanmi Lasante, 2012.*

The way in which U.S. food aid is regulated and distributed directly cultivates conditions of dependency among Haitians and Haiti as a whole. Because of these regulations, the two main options become either in-kind donations or monetization, both of which discourage Haitians from buying food locally. This becomes an immediate problem for the 70 percent of Haitians who are dependent, either directly or indirectly, on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods (CHRGJ 2012, 8). On one hand, the choice between free food and locally grown food is not really a choice for most Haitians when their income is less than US\$3 per day. Rice produced in Haiti now costs Haitians 50 to 100 percent more than rice that has been grown in the U.S., packaged, shipped, and distributed (Weisbrot, Johnston, and Ray 2010, 3).

On the other hand, when cheap, American-subsidized agriculture is sold in Haitian markets by NGOs through monetization, the prices of the food that Haitian farmers are trying to sell for themselves are artificially lowered. More often than not, the subsistence-scale farmers simply cannot compete and are forced out of business. Haiti as a country therefore becomes less and less self-sufficient in food production, and the farmers themselves actually end up becoming dependent on the food aid that put them out of business in the first place. In reality, the amount of nonemergency food that is monetized is far greater than 15 percent required by Congress. In 2008, 66 percent of all U.S. nonemergency food aid was monetized (CHRGJ 2012, 9).

Up until the 1980s, Haiti was actually self-sufficient in food production. The country imported only around 19 percent of its food (O'Connor 2013). In 1986, local production accounted for 80 percent of all food consumption in Haiti; by 2008, it accounted for only 42 percent (CHRGJ 2012, 5). This is due to increasing pressure from

the U.S. on the Government of Haiti to liberalize its trade policies, so that more American crops could be sold on the Haitian market. Under extreme pressure from the Clinton administration, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced to lower Haiti's protective agricultural import tariffs in 1995 from what was previously between 50 to 100 percent to anywhere from 0 to 15 percent. Haitian farmers were devastated by the sudden influx of cheap subsidized U.S. rice that undercut their prices and many of them were forced out of business. They soon flocked to cities in droves looking for factory work, resulting in the hastily built shantytowns that characterize Haitian cities. Since the 1980s, subsidized rice exports alone have devastated the livelihoods of thousands of Haitian farmers (Weisbrot, Johnston, and Ray 2010, 1). This is the point in which increasing amounts of Haitians were becoming dependent on food aid to survive.

Despite being such a small country, Haiti receives the second largest amount of U.S. nonemergency food aid in the world (CHRGJ 2012, 9). However, in such an agrarian society, this is hardly necessary. In fact, studies have shown that people rarely die of starvation or malnutrition due to lack of food in their communities and home countries. Rather, they die because they can't afford to buy the food that is available to them (Kenny 2011). Therefore, by limiting American food aid to agriculture that is grown in the U.S. and dismissing the option to purchase food aid locally, regulations surrounding Title II food aid promote dependency among individual Haitians on the very aid that put them out of business, while simultaneously cultivating the entire country's dependency on American subsidized agriculture.

American discourse regarding Haiti has created a very specific narrative. While Haiti typically receives very little attention in the media, the 2010 earthquake dominated American public interest and brought this narrative to the forefront. Certain patterns in the way Haiti is discussed emerged immediately in American post-earthquake media coverage. Take ABC's breaking news segment for example, through which many Americans learned about the earthquake for the first time within mere minutes of it happening. Renowned anchor George Stephanopoulos wasted no more than five seconds before reminding viewers that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. The segment was quickly turned over to ABC reporter Dan Harris, who opened with this statement: "It is hard to imagine a country that is less able to cope with a devastating earthquake," since "Haiti can barely take care of its people under normal circumstances" (ABC News 2010). Without realizing it, both men were complicit in perpetuating a narrative of Haiti among the American public that is based on a limited understanding of history and the notion of Haitians as victims. In order to understand this discourse more thoroughly, Giorgio Agamben's distinction between 'bare life' and 'political life' can be used as a practical framework for understanding how this rhetoric affects Haitians and Haiti as a whole.

Agamben, a contemporary Italian philosopher, bases his ideas about human life on the ancient Greek contrast between 'zoë' and 'bios.' The word 'zoë' expresses "the simple fact of living common to all living beings," while 'bios' is "the form or way of

living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 1998, 1). Essentially, the ability to live a full political and social life is the main characteristic that makes each one of us human and distinguishes humans from every other living species, while ‘zoë,’ or ‘bare life,’ simply refers to biological life.

In its most basic form, humanitarian aid is based on the conception of human life as ‘bare life,’ since its end goal is the protection of actual biological life. It is the suffering body, not the socially or politically motivated human, that becomes an object of pity and charity, and “whose photograph is shown [by humanitarian organizations] to obtain money but who is now becoming more and more difficult to find alive” (Agamben 1998, 133). The full ‘political life’ is effectively replaced with a bundle of basic needs in a physical human form – the need for food, water, and shelter. In this way, humanitarian aid transforms its beneficiaries into objects of charity as opposed to citizens with human rights.

Haitians, most of whose daily lives are governed largely humanitarian activity, are no exception. The concept of Haitians as ‘bare lives’ was initially perpetuated by humanitarian aid organizations in order to obtain funding from compassionate individuals and corporations, and this image especially took off after the 2010 earthquake. One might recall that after the earthquake, everyone from the Obama family to Hollywood celebrities to local news anchors emphasized the idea that every American citizen had the ability to help “save lives in Haiti,” attesting to the focus placed on biological lives. However, since there have been such a large number of organizations that are perpetuating this concept of Haitians as ‘bare lives’ (every NGO needs donations, and even USAID needs to justify spending American taxpayers’ money), American citizens

understand Haitians primarily as victims and objects of charity that are constantly in desperate need of food, water, shelter, and medical care.

Modern discourse in the United States regarding Haiti, which can be observed most easily through news coverage, has established a specific set of understandings that create a kind of narrative. This narrative is comprised of several components. First, the understanding that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere; because this has been repeated so many times and for so long, it's suggested that Haiti is a country that has always and will always be this way. Secondly, the idea that Haitians are, first and foremost, victims of recurring natural disasters; this idea implies that their unfortunate geographical location won't allow them to pick themselves up. Life in Haiti is generally quite difficult – when poverty and hunger don't seem to be enough, a natural disaster comes along; while trying to recover from natural disaster, deadly diseases add to the burden. Therefore (and thirdly), Haitians and the Government of Haiti are unable to take care of themselves because of these reasons; this suggests that the Haitian people are 'bare lives' and therefore regularly need help, which kind-hearted American citizens will gladly provide through individual donations.

These patterns become quite clear in an analysis of post-earthquake news coverage. ABC's breaking news segment mentioned in the beginning of this section is a prime example, touching on both Haiti's extreme levels of poverty and its alleged inability to take care of itself, even as viewers were learning about the earthquake for the first time. It then takes mere hours for news outlets to begin encouraging American citizens to donate to humanitarian aid organizations operating in Haiti. By mid-afternoon on January 13<sup>th</sup>, CNN anchor Fredricka Whitfield claims "you can't help enough"

because “simply staying alive in Haiti is an enormous undertaking,” attesting to the notion of Haitians as ‘bare lives’ who are always struggling to survive (CNN News 2010).

Less than an hour later, CNN correspondent Susan Candiotti was on the ground in Port-Au-Prince describing the scene on the streets in great detail to CNN anchor Rick Sanchez. She reports her observations of the “chilling scene” in which:

*“you would see people in some instances sitting nearby [dead bodies], some of them with vacant stares in their eyes just sitting in the middle of the street. At times, you would see young children walking about, as though seeing this horror didn't bother them. And you had to wonder, is that because this country has suffered so much and through so many natural disasters over so many years?”* (CNN News 2010).

After Candiotti’s segment ends, Sanchez goes on to interview CNN’s severe weather expert Chad Myers about the earthquake itself. They come to an agreement that the main reason why the earthquake had such a tragic effect on Haiti is that it ruptured only six miles under the surface of the earth and only ten miles from Port-Au-Prince, the capital and most populated city in the country.

These CNN news segments fit within America’s narrative of Haiti perfectly. Candiotti, for example, first describes a particularly horrifying scene of death and destruction, one that most Americans cannot even imagine. She then goes on to express her confusion about Haitians’ behavior, since even young children supposedly appeared to be unaffected by the situation around them. But rather than attributing this odd behavior to trauma, she implies that Haitians are simply indifferent to natural disasters because they have survived so many at this point. The importance of the earthquake itself was then driven home by Sanchez’s subsequent conversation with Myers regarding its strength and proximity to Port-Au-Prince. Both points indicate that Haitians are not only

victims of recurring natural disasters, but that these natural disasters – in this case, the earthquake – are the main cause of their circumstances. By the end of the segment, viewers are left with a sense of pity for these victims, who are seemingly prevented from escaping abject poverty by natural forces outside of human control. In half of every American household, this pity was translated into donations made out to humanitarian actors.

This is not to say that the points of this narrative aren't true: Haiti is in fact the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, it has actually been struck by plenty of natural disasters over time, and most Haitians struggle daily to acquire basic human necessities. The problem arises when the discourse among American citizens about this entire country is limited to these few basic concepts. This narrative ignores why Haiti is such an impoverished country in the first place. It ignores why natural disasters affect Haitians so tragically. It ignores the underlying reasons why daily life in Haiti is so incredibly difficult. Most importantly, it ignores the role that American foreign intervention has played in shaping Haiti into what it is today, and it ignores the role that the international community could possibly play in alleviating the problem. By offering this modern, Band-Aid type of humanitarian aid as the natural solution, American discourse therefore reinforces the conditions of dependency that are cultivated by NGOs and USAID, as outlined in the two previous sections.

When Haitians are consistently portrayed as mere victims of recurring natural disasters, as 'bare lives' who need immediate assistance, there is a certain degree of legitimacy accorded to humanitarian aid organizations in Haiti because of their background that allows them to make decisions solely on the basis of saving biological

lives. More so than ever before, this legitimacy allotted to humanitarian actors has transformed post-earthquake Haiti into what Agamben calls a ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2005). This is a place in which “the parameters of political and social aspirations ultimately become determined by the benevolent giver” because the ‘bare lives’ of the victims are dependent on “humanitarian compassion within a humanitarian space” (Müller 2013, 64). Important components of a state of exception are the “suddenness of an event” that “requires immediate action” (Müller 2013, 64). The major event in this case would be the 2010 earthquake; however, the state of exception has remained in place up through the present day, having been renewed with each subsequent drought and hurricane. This essentially means that several years after the earthquake, there is still a lot in Haiti that is “determined by the benevolent giver.”

The perpetual focus on the natural disasters themselves is misleading as well, implying that forces outside of human control are the sole reason for all the destruction left in their wake. However, the results of similar events point to a different interpretation. For example, the 8.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Chile on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 was 500 times stronger than the earthquake in Haiti but killed only 525 people. Clearly, there is more to the problem than the disasters themselves. One of the main reasons that the 2010 earthquake affected Haiti so tragically was the poor state of its infrastructure. Haiti’s poor infrastructure, in turn, is a product of Haiti’s history, in which the United States has played a relatively large role. Essentially, by focusing on the natural disasters (in this case, the earthquake) as singular events, American discourse surrounding Haiti is ignoring the structural global inequalities that produced this catastrophic outcome in the first place.

Perhaps the most explicit representation of the role of the American citizen in this narrative can be observed in Hope for Haiti Now campaign that took place on January 22, 2010, where more than 100 Hollywood celebrities came together and participated in a telethon and concert on live television to raise money for Haiti after the earthquake. One of the most telling quotes was that of actor Ben Stiller, who stated: “In Haiti, they've always prayed. And in spite of so many hardships, the people have a true faith in a power greater than themselves. Your phone call, your pledge of any amount, can literally be an answer to those prayers” (CNN 2010). The two most important points in this quote are the phrases “a power greater than themselves” and “your pledge... can literally be an answer to those prayers.” By likening the role of American citizens to the role of God, this language automatically places them in a position of moral superiority relative to Haitians.

The repeated appeals to donate to Haiti, especially from the Hope for Haiti Now campaign and the American Red Cross' text campaign, implies that it is possible to transform existing global structural inequalities with each individual donation. The belief that one is saving lives in Haiti by donating as little as \$10 or \$20 seriously inhibits the discussion about other ways in which the United States could help. This kind of discourse also makes it seem as if showing concern for others is a lifestyle choice and emphasizes the moral superiority of compassionate donors, rather than our obligations to help our fellow humans who have been wronged in the past. Humanitarianism is interested in saving biological lives right now, but not in changing the global inequalities that put Haitians in this situation in the first place, therefore reproducing the same conditions of inequality, poverty, and dependence.

This belief in the power of individual donations also allows American citizens to wash their hands of the situation once they donate and say, “Well, I’ve done all I can do.” If one takes this belief to its logical conclusion, it arguably means “now that I’ve given money to Haiti, it’s in Haitians’ hands to better themselves and prepare for the future.” Then, when they see that living and economic conditions in Haiti have remained stagnant over the course of decades, the logical conclusion is that Haitians aren’t doing enough or are simply incapable. In this way, pleas for donations by humanitarian organizations subtly shift the blame for Haiti’s poverty on Haitians themselves.

The concept of Haitians as ‘bare lives’ denies them a voice in the development of their own country, in the state of exception where humanitarian activity takes priority over political and social activity. It also focuses on the importance of the individual child whose image is used in the PSA rather than the well being of the state as a whole, therefore reinforcing Haitians’ dependence on independent, foreign-based humanitarian organizations.

This narrative that has been created stunts the discourse surrounding Haiti’s global inequality and what the United States and the international community should actually be doing to alter the system that produced such extreme poverty. In the way humanitarian aid operates today, there is always “hope” (for without hope there would be no funding), but there is hardly ever any tangible change. Although it is true that Haitians are “resilient” survivors (as was cited by several NGOs, reporters, and celebrities), within this discourse it is quickly forgotten that Haitians are one quality above everything else: human. It is necessary to remember that although they have endured countless hardships, they are social and political beings just like everyone else.

## *Conclusion*

*Se met ko kiveye ko.*

*It is the owner of the body who looks out for the body.*

There is perhaps no other place in the world that better exemplifies the effects of humanitarian aid than Haiti. By looking critically at post-earthquake Haiti, the goal of this thesis is to challenge our understanding of how humanitarian aid is implemented around the world. This study has outlined the ways in which American non-governmental organizations and U.S. foreign aid regulations affect Haitians by focusing on the American Red Cross and food aid distributed by USAID. Not only do American NGOs and U.S. regulations surrounding foreign aid cultivate conditions of dependency in Haiti, but the way in which American citizens currently understand and talk about Haiti also reinforces this dependency.

Emergency aid is still vital to humanitarianism in the period of time following a crisis; however, if aid becomes a part of everyday life like it has for Haitians, then it is doing nothing more but breeding dependency on the very services that are supposed to help. Unfortunately, Haiti is not the only country to experience this phenomenon, but it is arguably the most striking example of the present day.

There are a wide variety of solutions to this problem that could be pursued by the U.S. government. One could be to sever ties between USAID and private NGOs; state-level donor preferences continue to play an unnecessarily large role in how aid activity is carried out by NGOs operating in foreign countries. Another solution would be to end tied food aid and monetization altogether. This already long overdue, as these practices have been proven to be harmful and ineffective by multiple international agreements and

actors, such as the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the Paris Agreement on Aid Effectiveness, and the Accra Agenda for Action, just to name a few. American food aid would be far more effective if the U.S. government obtained the food through local or regional purchase. One of the more obvious solutions that could be carried out by both private NGOs and USAID is to involve real Haitians in development – they know what they need better than anyone else.

But above everything else, the United States as a whole needs to rethink humanitarian aid in a radical way. It is time to shift away from the usual paternalistic understanding of aid to a concept of aid that's sustainable; essentially, a shift from what we can do to help Haitians survive right now to how we can help Haitians realize their full potential. At the end of the day, American citizens are complicit, at some level, in replicating conditions of dependency in Haiti, either by donating to ineffective organizations, perpetuating a narrow understanding of Haitians as victims, or by simply paying their taxes. The United States is a democratic society – if citizens don't speak up and speak out about the way American foreign aid is distributed, these conditions will remain the same to the detriment of millions across the developing world.

We can no longer perpetuate the idea that the inequalities between developed and developing countries will always be this way, that Haiti has been and always will be the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. These global inequalities are actually possible to change, and this will be accomplished over time by small but significant actions. American efforts to alleviate poverty and suffering should be driven by a desire to help right past injustices, as well as listening to and understanding what resources would provide the greatest benefit to Haitians, rather than driven by a place of moral

superiority and self-interest. This kind of humanitarianism, based ultimately on pity and moral superiority, is the equivalent of using a Band Aid in place of surgery – it masks the structural inequalities and dynamics of power that produced the need for humanitarianism in the first place, including legacies of colonialism and aid-induced underdevelopment. Humanitarian aid, in the way it operates today, is barely keeping Haitians alive on a day-to-day basis, when it should truly be setting them up to thrive. Haitians don't need American pity – they need a realization of their human rights.

*Tout moun se moun.*  
*All people are people.*

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