

Sample Story

Today All Haitians Have Clean, Safe Water

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This Independence Day, and 228 years past Haitian Independence itself, this country was birthed into a new era of independence. As a final well was completed in the northern village of Limbé, Haitians everywhere are now free from the ravages of unclean and therefore unsafe water. The plague of unsafe water produced premature deaths among children in particular, as the lack of clean water brought cholera and other diseases to wide and often nearly unstoppable spread throughout the country.

The United Nations and World Health Organization reports that unsafe water is the fifth leading cause of death in the world's 49 poorest countries. Experts from the United Nations and water security organizations estimated that for many years in the last several decades, one in every five Haitian children under age 12, died from cholera, dysentery, or another illness caused by unhealthy drinking water. The 2010 earthquake, which killed approximately 200,000 Haitians made matters worse than they already were. Much of what little infrastructure existed at the time was destroyed— infrastructure worth 7.8 to 8.5 billion in US dollars, or 746 to 813 billion gourdes, about one-third of the country's current Gross Domestic Product. Many countries and international relief agencies promised to “build back better” (to use former President Clinton's words) in Haiti, but much of the assistance never materialized or has been lost through lack of accountability. Just months after the earthquake, the country was also devastated by a cholera epidemic. Ironically, its source was a group of United Nations peacekeepers who let sewage from their base contaminate a major water supply. That epidemic killed over 10,000 Haitians.

The earthquake and epidemic brought attention to Haiti and its needs, including the need for clean, safe water. Over the years dozens of international organizations that provide technologies for clean water have been at work in Haiti. These projects include those that dig and maintain wells, filter or otherwise purify water, and to a much lesser extent, the delivery of water through pipelines. Some of the more successful—and transparent—organizations include Clean Water for Haiti, Water.org, Water Aid, the Haiti Clean Water Project, Globalwaters.org, and Thirst Relief. The United Nations has also helped (the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, or MINUSTAH for short, produced clean water for 60,000 Haitians before closing the mission in OCTOBER of 2017). The UN has since replaced MINUSTAH with a successor mission: the UN Mission for Justice Support (MINUJUSTH). These organizations helped provide clean water to the areas they served, but they operated without coordination with one another. They failed to develop a shared, comprehensive, country-wide plan to deliver safe water to all Haitians.

In addition, successive Haitian governments and other governments as well (notably that of the United States) also failed to coordinate with one another, or with the development

agencies above (and others) and develop a shared plan for the country. Many cooks prepared their own dishes but no chef coordinated the menu. In short, many efforts and no small measure of good will failed to bring clean and safe water to all Haitians. The capacity seemed to be present among governments and organizations, but not the necessary coordinated, shared, and sustained strategy.

While various organizations worked in their own ways to provide safe water, conditions in Haiti resisted significant improvement. Politics, as always, remained contentious and dysfunctional. As if the normal problems and poverty were not enough, 2020 and 2021 brought acute crisis. First came the COVID 19 pandemic. While citizens in developing countries were being vaccinated by the millions, not one single vaccination had yet been administered in this country. Once again, the world's rich and powerful states demonstrated disregard for Haiti.

Second, in July, as national politics continued to unravel, President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated. Third, in August, a devastating 7.2 earthquake struck and killed over 2000. And then, in October, 17 missionaries from the United States were kidnapped. Kidnappings, a result of political and police weakness and corruption, had been on the rise for many months, and continued for many months thereafter. Crisis gripped Haiti tighter. Tragedy seemed to give birth to new tragedy in an unstoppable downward cycle. Haiti descended ever deeper into a state of economic, political, and security collapse. Although the country was filled with NGOs, civil society alone remained overmatched, and could not solve any of Haiti's complex problems.

Finally, this state of affairs began to turn around in 2022. It seemed as though the deepening crisis in Haiti, the crisis of Haiti, became too much to bear. As the world slowly climbed out of the pandemic, as vaccinations became available to adults and children alike in rich countries, and with a new presidential administration in Washington, renewed attention turned to Haiti. Late into 2021 not one Haitian had received a vaccination but before the year ended, serious efforts to address the pandemic finally landed here, and vaccinations were made available through the international organization created to do so, COVAX. US President Biden realized that he might lose control of Democratic control of congress in the elections of 2022, and therefore undertook a number of initiatives, including a modest plan for aid to Haiti. Beyond the US, other governments renewed their attention to Haiti as well. It seemed that the efforts to defeat the pandemic coupled with the acute and complex Haitian crisis, compelled action. In 2021, 42% of Haitians still had no access to safe water.

The critical factors that brought us to victory over unsafe water and all the diseases associated with it are these:

- Developed countries saw their governments make a concerted effort to provide water security. This effort was led by the United States, Canada, France, and Germany. Cuba contributed health officials to provide testing and monitor progress, as well as engineers.
- These countries did not marginalize the Haitian government, but rather, they made significant contributions to the Haitian government's capacity to deliver on its own efforts and worked with the government as a valued partner. The creation of a

Haitian National Ministry of Water, with a director directly under the authority of the president, was important.

- These governments worked closely with NGOs in Haiti that delivered water security in their own ways, demanding that all NGOs work within an agreed-upon strategy. Each NGO had specified geographical responsibility and produced clean water by way of its own chosen technology (digging wells or building water purifying systems).
- The governments and NGOs worked closely with the United Nations, most notably the World Health Organization.
- Each well and water purification project had a community Water Committee placed in charge of its maintenance and use.
- The construction of four sewage treatment plants, in conjunction with a sewage system, is on schedule to be completed in early 2031 and will serve over 90% of Port-au-Prince when finished.
- Laws to define and penalize water piracy passed the Haitian parliament in 2024.
- Haiti now employs a federal system of water directors who cover all Haitian villages, cities, and territory. Local water authorities work with regional authorities, who in turn answer to the director of the Minister of Water and the Parliament's Water Committee.
- Districts and regions that maintain at least 95% water security each year receive subsidies for agriculture and infrastructure from the national government. These funds are made available by external governments and the United Nations.

These critical factors were not put underway until late in 2022. They might have been enjoined sooner, but today we celebrate the progress made over the past ten years. A decade of hard work produced clean water for all Haitians after generations of needless deaths due to unsafe water. Cholera, dysentery, hepatitis, and typhoid have been on a sharp decline since 2025. Globally, health care is understood to be a human right, so there has been a long-standing moral obligation to provide safe water to all Haitians. That obligation has now been met. The cost has been \$936,000,000 or €808,255,000. A vast amount of money, it was a small investment for all the governments and organizations that shared it over this past ten years.

The celebration in Haiti today is a celebration waiting to happen in many other countries in the global south. We now have a powerful model for how clean water can be attained elsewhere.

(1600 words)