

Reframing the Haiti Narrative

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Introduction

“A people that loves freedom will in the end be free” (Simón Bolívar)

Current Media Landscape

Currently, most international media is paying scant attention to the crisis unfolding in Haiti. When the crisis is covered, it is often reduced to violent rioting by protesters upset about recent fuel shortages and rampant political corruption. This type of sensationalist coverage of the crisis compounds an already pervasive “narrative of hopelessness” that is not only factually inaccurate but also a major contributor to widespread apathy from would-be donors and supporters of the Haitian cause.

‘There Is No Hope’: Crisis Pushes Haiti to Brink of Collapse

Haitians say the violence and economic stagnation stemming from a clash between the president and the opposition are worse than anything they have ever experienced.



Protesters last week in Les Cayes, Haiti, surrounded a vehicle that had been burned in a previous demonstration. Impassable roads have contributed to the country's emergency.

The perspective that media coverage is largely missing comes across loudly from direct testimonies of Haitians: it's bigger than fuel shortages, it is bigger than just demanding President Moïse's resignation, and it is bigger than the PetroCaribe corruption scandal. It's about the people being fed up with foreign intervention supporting an oligarchic elite that has benefitted from institutionalized corruption (a handful of families control the vast majority of the wealth). The current months of protest were sparked by the realization that billions of dollars of PetroCaribe support given to Haiti by the Venezuelan government of Chavez, has been stolen by the last 2 U.S.-backed Haitian governments and the debt (even at very low interest) is now on the backs of average Haitians with nothing to show for the aid. Haitians are demanding justice, accountability, and change. Within this *movement for democratic change*, there are two feelings that have been constant and unbreakable for at least 228 years: a demand for justice, and a willingness to protest and resist. As the first and only country founded by a liberation struggle of enslaved people, Haitians are fierce advocates for justice and human rights. The fear, however, of an independent, liberated, black nation has historically been a threat to the powerful. From the time of the Haitian people's victory against Napoleon's France in 1804, America, France, and other powerful countries have embargoed, occupied, and undermined Haitian sovereignty. But the Haitian people continue to demand justice, sovereignty, and the dream of a free and independent state. Protests, organized by the Haitian people in pursuit of justice, are often portrayed as riots yet they are in fact, rooted in demands for justice.

Objectives

As PIH's continues to mobilize resources for Haiti and ensure our long-term commitment to Zanmi Lasante's work, it is important to challenge the widespread myths surrounding Haiti, which are fueled by a lack of information about the historical, political, and economic conditions that lead to the current situation. We do not want to shy away from acknowledging the chronic challenges but want to add crucial context for supporters to understand not only "how we got here" but also what is needed to support the Haitian people to gain true freedom.

We need to show that Haiti's history is a **history of foreign oppression, meddling, and punishment.**

What Haitians are asking for

- 1) End to all forms of foreign interference (overt and subtle) in the national democratic process, economic, and fiscal policies.
- 2) Solidarity instead of charity. Not simply aid administered by NGOs, but rather support to achieve political reforms and build lasting infrastructure to the benefit of the people, in partnership with the Haitian government.
- 3) Long-term commitment to help independent people solve a complex web of social and economic issues.

4 Myths we need to bust

- **MYTH #1:** Haiti is incapable or unwilling to create a functioning democratic political environment.
- **MYTH #2:** Haitian society is incurably corrupt.
- **MYTH #3:** Haitians are violent or comfortable with chaos.
- **MYTH #4:** Despite all the foreign aid, Haitians were not able to grow their economy or rebuild after the earthquake.

Key themes: blood, resistance, resilience, foreign influence and retaliation, democracy strangled by US interventionism, Economy choked by foreign debt

1) Haitians are incapable (or unwilling) to create a functioning democratic political environment.

From the start of their free history in 1804, the Haitian people have tried to establish a lasting democratic government, but internal class power struggles and foreign influence prevented any lasting popular democratic government to take hold. Foreign interference continues to this day.

- *Haiti was the very first slave colony to successfully gain independence. As a first independent “black nation,” Haiti became a beacon of hope for other colonial oppressed nations, including providing support for Simón Bolívar’s struggles against colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. This inherently posed a huge threat to all other colonial powers that depended on slave labor (US included).*
- *Unlike many newborn states, Haiti did not receive early support by other nations (especially in trade). Instead, an embargo was placed by the US and France so that Haiti could not export their products. It took almost 60 years for the US to recognize Haiti’s independence.*

- *The US (closest neighbor) impediment to Haiti's early development was devastating. Fearing the contagion of liberty for enslaved people would spread, the first US president to declare an embargo against Haiti was Thomas Jefferson. Later, Fredrick Douglass tried to support Haiti's independence as Ambassador to Haiti but the US wanted the country as a strategic port and continued to devalue Haitian sovereignty.*
- *Throughout its history, foreign governments made alliances with the tiny elite (~10% of the population) of Haiti. Many of these elite families were enslavers and remain the landholders of the country. Making alliances with this group, the US occupied Haiti 20 years between 1915-1934 "to curb European influence in the hemisphere" and to pillage the Haitian treasury and resources. While the occupation ended in 1934, the US supported the 30-year dictatorship of the Duvalier family.*
- *The Lavalas movement—a pro-poor and pro-democracy movement that was supported by the vast majority of Haitians-- resulted in the toppling of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1989. In 1991, President Jean Bertrand Aristide became the first democratically elected president. But a US government under George HW Bush and the CIA, fearing Aristide's socialist agenda and potential ties to Cuba, backed a coup d'état that toppled the Aristide government seven months after Aristide was elected. For three years, under the repressive military rule, the country was thrown into chaos. A massive exodus of Haitians seeking asylum fled to the US and the instability became part of the US presidential campaign.*
- *President Clinton reinstalled President Aristide to stop the refugee crisis. While Aristide had lost some of his support from the middle class, he was re-elected by a significant margin and especially among the poor. Haiti underwent a brief period of democratic power transfer and calm between 1994 and 2004.*
- *Just after the bicentennial celebration in 2004, the US government again backed a coup d'état orchestrated by George W Bush, which again, resulted in chaos. Since 2004, the US has installed or co-opted a series of corrupt presidents.*
- *Haiti has since before the revolution faced complicated internal class struggles (based on race/ownership status). Later on, the elite was supported by western nations and protected by a US-backed "Haitian Army" which only ever fought one enemy: the Haitian people themselves.*

2) Haitian society is incurably corrupt.

Corruption is a chronic issue in Haiti like it is in many other nations (both developed and developing). It is important however not to make the general assumption that most Haitians are tolerating corruption. Vast inequality, on all social levels, clearly demarks the line between a few members of the Haitian elite and the overwhelming majority of the population. The current unrest in Haiti is a testimony of the popular resistance to widespread corruption and a willingness to reform its own institutions, rooted in the distinctive pride and resilience of the Haitian people.

- *Corruption is widespread in most countries, but is more damaging and visible within highly unequal societies where a dominant group of a few is oppressing the larger population.*
- *Lack of proper government accountability (non-democratically elected) encourages the pilfering of national resources and the amassing of wealth by a propped few.*

3) Haitians are violent or comfortable with chaos.

The history of Haiti is written with blood. Haitians often identify their struggle as carrying “the blood of Dessalines” or being the “children of Dessalines,” the first president of liberated Haiti who was an enslaved person who became a general in the Haiti army that defeated the French. The forced absence of any period of stable democracy and the dire human conditions resulted from a wide range of political and economic factors have pushed Haitians to rebel against foreign and domestic oppressors. When people are desperate, they revolt.

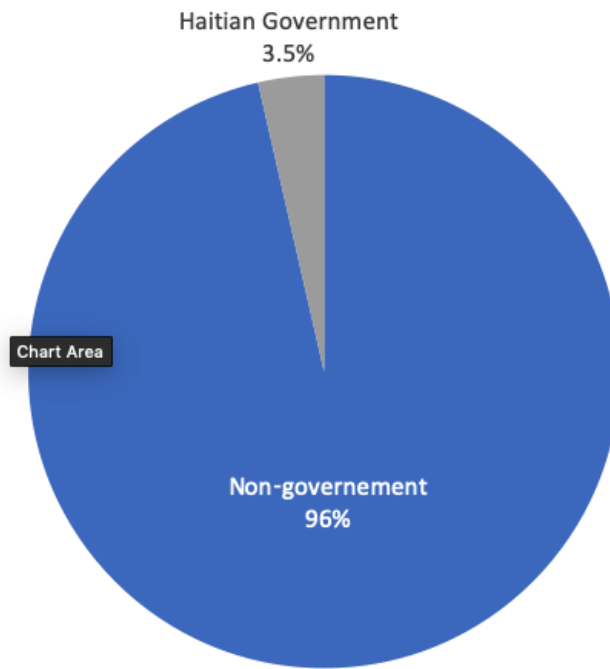
- *Hundreds of thousands of indigenous Taino were wiped out by colonizers (diseases and slavery).*
- *Brutal conditions attached to slave labor continued for more than two centuries.*
- *The Napoleonic attempt to submit the rebellion during the war of independence - although ultimately a failure - was incredibly violent.*
- *As an early independent nation, Haiti faced decades of internal power struggles punctuated by many smaller popular uprisings.*
- *US occupation came with indiscriminate killings of thousands of Haitians.*
- *Several military dictatorships harshly repressed the local population.*
- *Current demonstrations in Haiti are led by the majority of the population, not thugs or gangs of rioters. Similar situations in Hong Kong and Chile are receiving far more media attention and are widely hailed as a heroic push by the population to achieve democratic change. How is the Haitian situation any different?*

4) Despite all the foreign aid, Haitians were not able to grow their economy or rebuild after the earthquake.

*It is a common misconception that, despite an unprecedented amount of donations that flowed to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, the Haitian government was not able to effectively use foreign aid to rebuild infrastructure. While it is true that infrastructure rebuilding has been slow and incomplete, it is important to first understand **why** the national infrastructure was so weak, even before the earthquake, and then to take a look **where** the funds actually went.*

- *Lucrative sugar (“white gold”) plantation infrastructure was wiped out during revolution years.*
- *Absurd reparations imposed by France (equivalent to \$21B) were effectively an act of extortion by the French who demanded reparations “for loss of slaves and profit” in exchange for recognition of Haiti’s independence and opening up the quasi-embargo imposed on the new nation. The debt (which carried a hefty interest and a whopping 20% service fee) crushed Haiti’s chances to build a profitable export/import trade and left the government with no funds to improve social infrastructure.*
- *Debt traps pushed by foreign banks (IMF, WB) choked Haiti’s economic growth well into the 20th century.*
- *Economic retaliation by the US and European nations stifled early trade opportunities and neoliberal policies imposed great restrictions on the domestic production, resulting in Haiti being a net importer of local crops such as sugar (see also: rice dumping by the US).*
- *US agro-subsidies made it impossible for Haiti to compete on key commodity crops (sugar, cotton, coffee).*
- *Most investments were historically focused on urban areas (where the elite was based), leaving much of rural Haiti, which depended on agriculture, massively unsupported.*
- *No stable democracy meant no meaningful infrastructural investments to create an industrial alternative to a suffering agricultural sector (the majority of Haitians were small farmers or peasants).*
- *Depletion of natural resources (i.e. deforestation) that started when Haiti was a slave colony, increased later on due to a lack of energy alternatives. This worsens the effects of natural disasters (flooding, mudslides, etc.). Only 2% of Haiti’s territory is forested.*
- *After the earthquake, an already very fragile infrastructure was dealt an almost final blow. Instead of funneling money to rebuild infrastructure, most of the aid was disseminated to thousands of foreign NGOs (only 3% of funds reached the Haitian government). The lack of coordination and trust in the Haitian institutions resulted in a massive misuse of available funds. (The Red Cross, for instance, could not spend \$500M of the funds it received from donations received after the earthquake.)*
- *Such massive destruction would have taken a stable country a decade to rebuild. It took New York City more than a decade to rebuild Ground Zero after 9/11.*
- *The total amount of aid disbursed by donors, since 2010: \$7,538,885,632*

- The amount of aid given to the government in the form of budget support: \$280,844,071 (3.5%).
- Total aid awarded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID): \$2.3 billion. Of that amount, percent of which was given to organizations or companies located inside the Beltway (Maryland, DC, Virginia): **55.5 percent**. Percent of which was awarded directly to Haitian organizations or companies: **2.3 percent**.



Percentage of donated aid by recipient

Source: CEPR: Center for Economic and Policy Research

Figures of the 2010 catastrophe

- 65% of Haiti's economic activity was located in the Port-au-Prince area, where the earthquake hit.
- 230,000-300,000 individuals were estimated dead.
- 300,000 estimated injured.
- 1.5 million people displaced.
- 3 million people affected (25%+ of the population).
- Damages estimated at \$7.8 billion (120% of Haiti's GDP).
- Reconstruction funds needed: estimated at \$11.3 billion.
- Funds provided by the World Bank (via IDA): 102.8 million.
- 1.3M cubic meters of rubble.
- 60% of Government buildings/80% of schools destroyed.

- Some 105,000 homes were completely destroyed and more than 208,000 damaged.
- Over 1,300 educational establishments, and over 50 hospitals and health centers collapsed.
- President's Palace, Parliament, the Law Courts, and most of the Ministry and public administration buildings were destroyed.
- 25% of civil servants were killed.
- 70% of the population at the time of the disaster was living under the poverty line.

Situation Report

Humanitarian Needs as of January 2019 (OCHA)

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS



1. VITAL NEEDS ARISING FROM A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS RESULTING IN LOSS OF ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

About 2.6 million people are at risk of acute food insecurity in 2019, including 571,000 people in emergency (IPC 4) and 2 million in crisis (IPC 3). 532,000 people need access to health services. Nearly 912,000 people are still in need of assistance with shelter and non-food items. Nearly 180,000 children are out of school. 13,000 children (under five years of age) suffer from severe acute malnutrition. Households affected by global acute malnutrition need access to safe drinking water. People of Haitian origin returned from the Dominican Republic need safe water, hygiene and sanitation in hosting centres at the border.



2. NEEDS TO STRENGTHEN PREPAREDNESS FOR NATURAL DISASTERS

Nearly 568,000 people live in areas at high risk of being affected by natural disasters of seismic or hydro-meteorological origin. The capacities of the most vulnerable communities to cope with natural disasters in the most at-risk areas need to be strengthened. State institutions, community and civil society organizations involved in risk and disaster prevention and management need support to prepare for and better anticipate or respond to shocks.



3. HEALTH NEEDS CAUSED BY EPIDEMICS

More than 333,000 people will be affected by the cholera epidemic and about 31,000 by diphtheria and malaria epidemics. The need for detection, confirmation and investigation, and for appropriate and community-based medical care for cholera, diphtheria and malaria cases persists.



4. PROTECTION NEEDS RELATED TO THE VIOLATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE

Approximately 465,000 people in the most affected communities are at risk of abuse, physical and sexual violence, exploitation and exclusion. The protection of the fundamental human rights of the most vulnerable persons needs to be promoted and strengthened, in particular through access, with minimum standards of care, to psychosocial, legal, medical, security and reintegration services for victims and survivors, and support to public institutions, community and civil society organizations with a protection mandate, in the implementation of measures to strengthen protection.

TOTAL POPULATION OF HAITI

10,981,229



LITERACY RATE
WOMEN (15-24 YEARS)

 **70.5 %**

LITERACY RATE
MEN (15-24 YEARS)

 **74.4%**

**CHILD MORTALITY
RATE**

 **55** over 1000

**SINGLE FEMALE HEADS OF
HOUSEHOLDS**

 **42.1 %**

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

 **0.498**
168th over 189 (2018)

GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX

 **0.601**
144th over 188 (2017)

PEOPLE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE

2,600,000



CHILDREN
(<18 YEARS)

 **47 %**

ADULTS
(18-59 YEARS)

 **47 %**

ELDERLY
(>59 YEARS)

 **6 %**

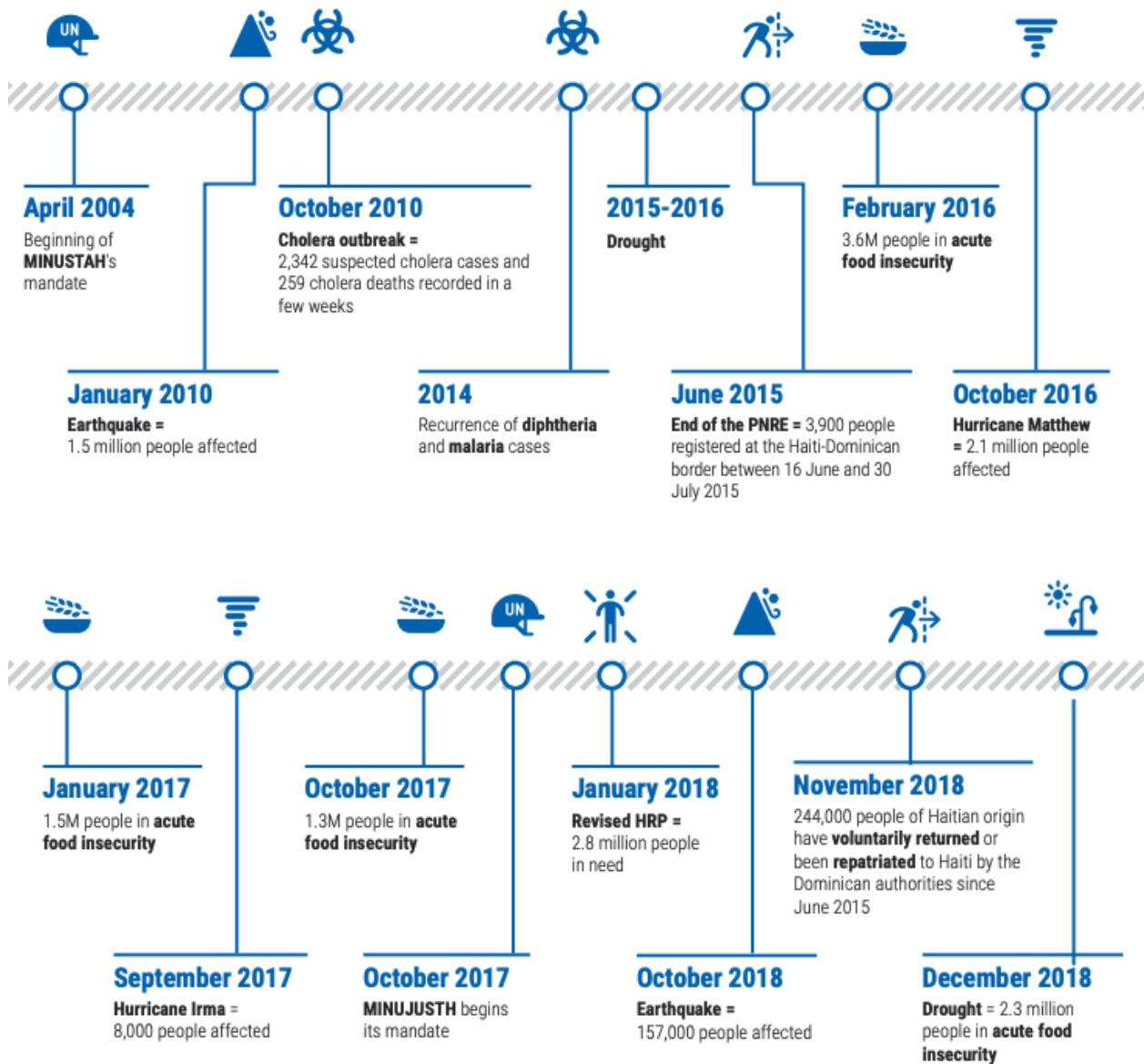
WOMEN

 **50 %**

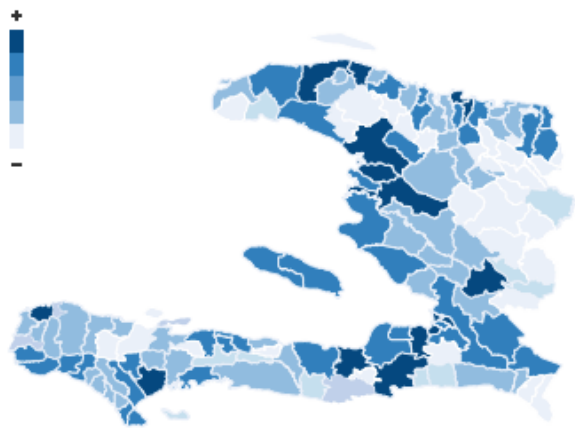
MEN

 **50 %**

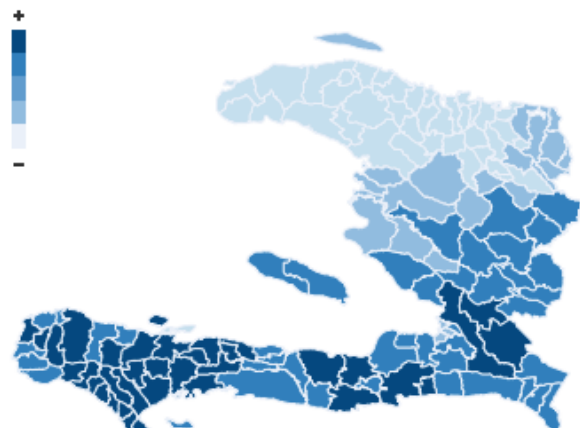
CHRONOLOGY OF THE CRISIS



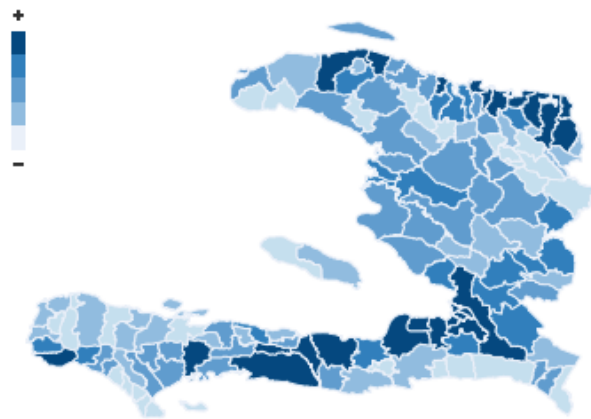
VULNERABILITY TO FLOODS



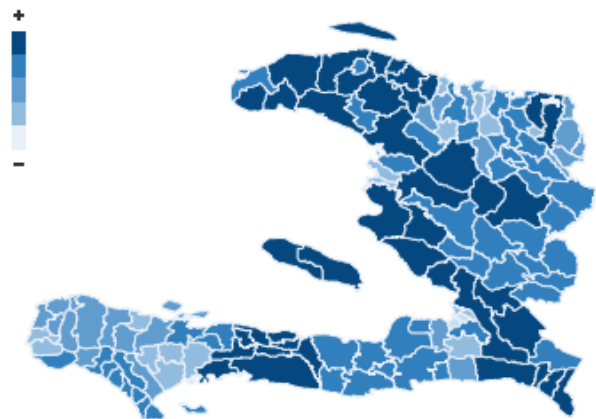
VULNERABILITY TO HURRICANES



VULNERABILITY TO EARTHQUAKES



VULNERABILITY TO DROUGHT

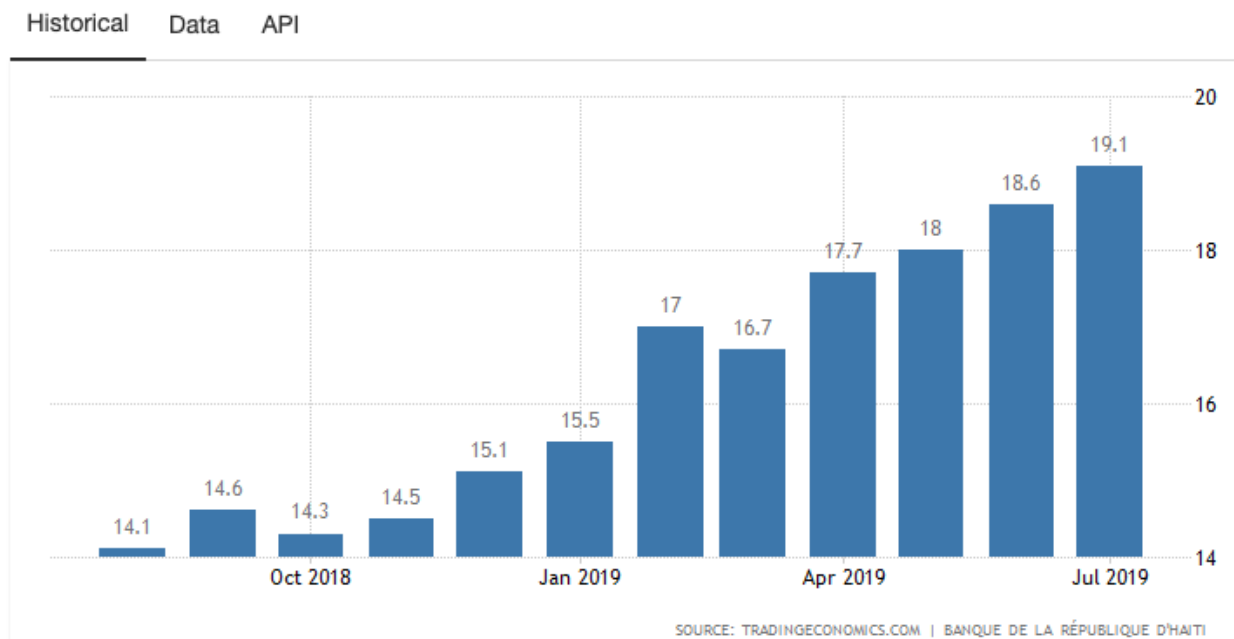


Disasters preceding the 2010 Earthquake

Table 2: Summary of the last four disasters in Haiti

Event	Effect on GDP	Individuals affected	Dead
2004 Hurricane Jeanne	7% du PIB	300 000	5 000
2007 Hurricanes Dean and Noel	2% du PIB	194 000	330
2008 Hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike	15% du PIB	1 000 000	800
2010 Earthquake	100% du PIB	2 000 000	222 500
TOTAL		3 494 000	228 600

Inflation Rate



Current Political Support (CEPR)

- *The date on which then-candidate Trump proclaimed that he would be Haiti's "greatest champion": September 16, 2016.*
- *The date on which the US announced it was ending TPS for Haitians: November 20, 2017.*
- *The date on which it was reported that President Trump referred to Haiti as a "shithole" country: January 11, 2018.*

Exchange Rate and Fuel Prices (CEPR)

- *The exchange rate at the time of the earthquake (Haitian gourdes per dollar): 40.5.*
- *Exchange rate today: 76.3.*
- *The percent by which gas prices would increase following a July 2018 government announcement: 38 percent.*

RESOURCES

History of Haiti

[Haitian Modern History \(1806-Present\) - Revolutions Podcast \(ep.4-19\)](#)

[Paul Farmer's "Blood, Sweat, and Baseballs: Haiti in the West Atlantic System"](#)

Articles

CEPR: [Haiti by the Numbers](#)

WBUR: [You Can't Understand Haiti's Protests Without Understanding History"](#)

Al Jazeera : [What's Really Behind the Crisis in Haiti?](#)

RNN: [An Overlooked Crisis The World Should Not Ignore](#)

Truthout.org: [International Actors Have Always Been the Biggest Threat to Democracy in Haiti](#)

Truthout.org: [Why Has Haiti Risen Up Once Again?](#)

Books

[Paul Farmer: Haiti After the Earthquake](#)