

## Striving towards a Sustainable Solution: Water and Community in Veron, Dominican Republic

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### Abstract

Access to clean and sanitized water is one of the most fundamental of Human Rights. However, in many communities around the world, water remains contaminated and a danger to human health. This photo essay seeks to outline an example of such circumstances in Domingo Maiz, shed light on the potential for a sustainable solution, and embody the cultural beauty of the local community.

### Author's Note

Erica Bower is an undergraduate student at Columbia University studying Sustainable Development, Human Rights and Economics. Her interest resides in exploring the ways in which these fields intersect, both academically and in fieldwork, and is inspired by the role that photography can play in capturing this multifaceted nexus. This photo essay documents research conducted during the summer of 2011 in Domingo Maiz, Veron, Dominican Republic.

**Keywords:** Dominican Republic, Water Access

## 1. Introduction

Among many other factors, development of the tourism industry in the Dominican Republic has made the dichotomy between wealthy and poor increasingly stark (Weiner, 2010). Nowhere is this disparity more evident than in Domingo Maiz, Veron, a neighborhood community just 9 miles inland from Punta Cana resort area. Over the past 25 years, Veron has become a settlement of migrant labor, both Dominican and Haitian, who work at hotels during tourist seasons. This seasonal variation in population density, compounded with the lack of official governmental structure, makes obtaining census data extremely difficult. In addition, the population of this informal community is in constant flux and lacks uniform awareness about proper water cleanliness and sanitation concerns (Reiff, 1996). This mindset therefore exacerbates improper waste disposal, unofficial well construction, and bacteria-infected water in Veron. In fact, data from recent studies demonstrates that an overwhelming number of wells, specifically in the barrio Domingo Maiz, are contaminated at levels with drastic impact on public health in the community (Novack, 2011).

This past summer, with the help of Peace Corps volunteer Sabine Bergmann, Colgate student Alexis Apostol, Columbia Ph.D. student Natalia Rossi, and numerous volunteers from the local community, I was a part of the efforts to explore these

circumstances further. After conducting a household assessment of water circumstances and a demographic census of Domingo Maiz, we collected startling sociological data. In particular, the extent of parasitic infections, specifically with regard to concentration of children per household, was truly overwhelming. On a more optimistic note, the study also calculated that a wastewater treatment plant to serve the neighborhood could be implemented on land located within Domingo Maiz. With incorporation of the perspective and help of local community organizers to ensure long term sustainability, volunteers from Peace Corps, Save the Children, Grupo Punta Cana and various universities hope to make this project a reality in the upcoming months. Access to clean and sanitized water is a fundamental human right, and every community, including Domingo Maiz, Veron, deserves a sustainable solution to such existing problems (Ishay, 2010).

This photo essay seeks to outline the need for a sustainable solution, illustrate the prospects for the future of the water treatment plant, and embody the rich cultural fabric of the community in Domingo Maiz.



Photo 1: A typical housing structure in the “barrio” of Domingo Maiz, Veron.



Photo 2: A man sits under a sign that translates “do not throw trash”, while garbage ironically litters the foreground. A “tinaco” water carrier sits above the building.

Photo 3: A narrow path between houses, empty now but ordinarily crowded with children playing and animals roaming around.





Photo 4: Trash and discarded materials line the boundaries of the community and thereby contribute to the contamination of the water supply.



Photo 5: Fecal matter from animals, both domesticated and non-domesticated, also leads to contamination of wells in the vicinity.



Photo 6: A typical “tinaco” water storage container sits atop a house; these devices often hold contaminated water.



Photo 7: Pipes for water transport line the walls of Houses. Photo 8: The community organizer of Domingo Maiz, Chelo, explains the potential contamination of this particular well.



Photo 9: A reflection peering into a well during inspection; notice the peeling blue paint on the sides, another potentially contaminating factor.



Photo 10: A young boy glances over his shoulder at the mound of cement that covers the top of an informal and poorly constructed septic tank in his yard.



Photos 11-15: A series on the intimate relationship between a mother and daughter—the delicate placement of her footwear is the embodiment of both maternal care and of empowerment of future generations.



Photo 16: A young boy walks through the street with a stray dog.



Photo 17: An optimistic girl helps to care for her younger sibling.



Photo 18: A Haitian woman sews clothes for a sale below; her efforts contribute to creating the intangible fabric of the community in Domingo Maiz.



Photo 19: An array of cloth and clothing for sale; despite the fact that a large portion was donated from abroad, this sale both generated income and strengthened the fabric of the community.



Photo 20: Volunteers from the local community, Peace Corps, and Columbia and Colgate University collaborated to work on this water and sanitation study. By incorporating the perspective and ideas of community members, they are empowered to take the project into their own hands and ensure its completion and sustainability in the long term.



Photo 21: This is “El Solar”, the plot of land where the wastewater treatment plant for the Domingo Maiz community will be constructed in the upcoming months. However, this is merely a pilot program—if the project proves successful, this type of sustainable solution can be replicated and escalated to larger regions, in the Dominican Republic and across the globe.

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