
Documentary Review: Life and Debt

The documentary *Life and Debt* represents a real example of the impact economic globalization can have on a developing country. Whenever I thought about Jamaica, I only considered it as a tropical, beach-like atmosphere and a tourist destination. I never took the time and considered what life could be like for those living there yearlong, and particularly those who were not involved in the tourism industry. The documentary shows Jamaica in a different light, by showing a pressing problem of debt. The everyday survival of many Jamaicans is based on the economic decisions of the United States and other powerful foreign countries.

In the 1970s, the country's former prime minister signed a loan agreement which ultimately led Jamaica to over four billion dollars in debt to the World Bank and IMF. Key to its success was a long-term development plan that could have prioritized native infrastructure and resources. But the IMF was not interested in the long-term. Demanding short-term repayment of the debt, they insisted that costs be cut in exactly those sectors that could support long-term development: education, health, and native--largely agrarian-based--production for the export market. Not only would Jamaica have to tighten its belt, it would have to open up its doors to foreign imports by eliminating all protectionist rules that favored local industry and farming.

This ultimately caused a sinking economy of low valued imports and sweatshops that destroy local businesses and agriculture. In the documentary, workers who are working gruesome six-day-a-week work schedules to receive the legal minimum wage of only \$30 in US money for the entire week. Many women have protested against the poor compensation, and have been fired from their jobs; being placed on a blacklist preventing them from ever getting work again. The country's ports are lined with the factories of high profile companies, such as McDonalds and Burger King. With these economic and political foundations in place, the documentary then proceeds to examine various sectors of the economy that have fallen victim to "globalization". It starts with a trip to the countryside where local produce farmers explain how potato, onion and carrot imports from the United States have put them out of business. In farming villages that formerly provided livelihoods to virtually every family, there is nothing but unplowed fields and abandoned houses nowadays. We also learn that the native dairy industry has been destroyed by the import of powdered milk from the United States. Jamaican dairymen, who have been prosperous for most of their lives and who have provided jobs for their countrymen, show us the abandoned stalls that cows once occupied. Most of these animals were sold to slaughterhouses at a loss years ago. They also explain that it would be virtually impossible to restart the dairy industry if the price of powdered milk ever shot up. What is being fostered by the neo-liberal regime is not development but dependency.

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The IMF assumes that the combination of increased interest rates and cutbacks in government spending will shift resources from domestic consumption to private investment. It is further assumed that keeping the price of labor down will be an incentive for increasing employment and production. Increased unemployment, sweeping corruption, higher illiteracy, increased violence, prohibitive food costs, dilapidated hospitals, increased disparity between rich and poor characterize only part of the present day economic crisis.

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