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Venezuela, Malnutrition

Venezuela: A Country Where Malnutrition Has Affected Too Many Children

“Kenyerber Aquino Merchán was 17 months old when he starved to death... When Kenyerber’s body was finally ready for viewing, his father, Carlos Aquino, a 37-year-old construction worker, began to weep uncontrollably. ‘How can this be?’ he cried, hugging the coffin and speaking softly, as if to comfort his son in death. ‘Your *papá* will never see you again.’” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). The loss of infants due to malnutrition has become a tragic, yet common story among many Venezuelan families. Food, water, and other medical supplies have become scarce, which also means that hospitals cannot provide them for their patients. This prevalent issue in Venezuela is important to pay attention to because the shortage of medical resources and staff can cause many serious issues including death. Venezuela’s dependency on oil exports, mixed with incompetent and unreliable political leadership, as well as hyperinflation, has devastated the economy and is limiting citizens’ access to necessary resources. Not paying attention to the healthcare and malnutrition crisis in Venezuela will continue to cost lives and leave many other citizens ill with little chance of getting better.

Venezuela lost a great majority of its previous wealth and success because of the collapse of its oil exports. There are two major reasons why the oil industry in Venezuela had a major decline. Hugo Chávez, the president preceding Nicolás Maduro, the current president, started to fire PDVSA employees in 2003 and replaced them with inexperienced employees loyal to him. PDVSA is the state-owned natural gas and oil company in Venezuela. Additionally, in 2007, international expertise was also forced out (Rapier, 2019). The result was the removal of the expertise that was essential to develop its heavy oil. The second reason was that “the Chávez government failed to appreciate the level of capital expenditures required to continue developing the country’s oil” (Rapier, 2019). Along with the mismanagement of the oil sector, the distribution of oil proceeds made the issue even direr as “Chávez funneled billions from the oil industry into the country’s social programs. But he failed to reinvest adequately in this capital-intensive industry” (Rapier, 2019). He was buying votes instead of focusing on the economy. The country did not have enough to finance other parts of its economy, and “In 2018, Venezuela’s oil production fell to 1.5 million BPD, a decrease of more than 50% below 2006 levels” (Rapier, 2019).

As illustrated in the previous example, the current incompetent and corrupt political leaders are failing to address and act on important issues that are affecting its population and economy.

Venezuela is a socialist country and if the government does not wisely distribute its funds, which is what happened, some areas can be underprovided. Although the government stated that they have enough medical supplies and medicine for all the citizens and can provide care for all, the doctors and citizens of Venezuela have realized that they have a crisis and the government is not addressing it adequately (Stevens, 2017). The government, which is not doing anything significant to help the problem, “continues to paint a rosy picture of its health care system — and to retaliate against anyone who reports otherwise, according to the report” (Schreiber, 2019). Because Maduro is incompetent in leading the country, an interim president, Juan Guaidó, has claimed leadership. Although more than 50 countries, including the United States, recognize Guaidó as president (“South America: Venezuela”), Maduro does not accept this which leaves the country further divided.

Due to the mismanagement, in 2015, Venezuela’s GDP per capita was \$17,300, and in 2016, it decreased to \$14,400. As of 2017, the GDP per capita was \$12,500, and it continued to drop throughout the years (“South America: Venezuela”). With a low GDP per capita and product costs increasing due to inflation, it is very difficult for citizens to acquire what is necessary to live. Maduro’s negligence of properly managing the money is why “many blame him and his socialist government for worsening the country’s decline” (Bailey, Dominic, et al, 2019). The leadership of Chavez and Maduro is what has caused the downfall in many industries and a loss of wealth. The government seems to be doing very little about their evident problem and there are people from Venezuela who are saying that “Our people are dying and you’re doing absolutely nothing” (“Venezuela’s broken health system”, 2019).

Another consequence of the current lack of leadership in Venezuela is hyperinflation. This is a problem because when their biggest client, the U.S., which had been a purchaser of about 40 percent of Venezuela’s oil regularly, stopped importing their oil, Venezuela lost one of the greatest sources of their revenues (Ellner & Salas 48, 2007). Profits from oil fell and foreign trade decreased, deepening Venezuela’s Issues. “After a 500 percent increase in inflation between 2015 and 2016 that was meant to ameliorate the loss in oil revenue, many Venezuelans saw their incomes disappear and necessities such as water and electricity stripped away... Death rates have soared due to increased violence and a shortage of care and antibiotics” (Stevens, 2017). The government started to print more money to fund themselves, but it led to inflation where money in Venezuela isn’t worth as much (“Nicolas”).

Malnutrition is affecting many people in Venezuela including children, and hospitals don’t have food or other supplies to suppress this predicament. In a country that once had very few malnutrition cases, “.... doctors at 21 public hospitals in 17 states across the country said that their emergency rooms were being overwhelmed by children with severe malnutrition” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). With more and more children experiencing malnutrition and hospitals not having the resources to aid, “Babies die because it is hard to find or afford infant formula, even

in emergency rooms.” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). The increase in malnutrition started to be noticeable by the end of 2016 and only escalated in 2017. Dr. Ingrid Soto de Sanabria who is the chief of the hospital’s nutrition, growth, and development department stated that Venezuela’s malnutrition problem “is directly related to the shortages and inflation.” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). This stems back to the government’s inability to accept their situation and attempt to fix it. Instead, they tried to hide their statistics so they would not get blamed for all of the cases.

A serious issue directly caused by the previously explained problem in Venezuela, families have been forced to eat less food, as well as less nutritious foods. Many families don’t have three meals a day and, “Cheap root vegetables such as Yucca have become main meals for many.” (Krygier, 2017). Some children “rarely go to school because they have no food to take with them.” (Krygier, 2017). People scour the streets in search of food to feed their families and have little access to clean water. In 2001, the average family size in Venezuela was 4.3 people (“Household”). Families have to feed so many people and don’t get much income. One of the higher-paying jobs of being a surgeon has such a low paying salary that according to Efraím Vegas, a resident Trauma surgeon, “We did get a raise. They doubled our salary from 4,500 to 9,000... Maybe I’ll buy two kilos of flour” (“Venezuela’s broken health system”, 2019).

In Venezuela, infant formula is unattainable for many, and for mothers who cannot breastfeed due to illnesses including malnutrition, the baby will likely become malnourished. The scarcity of formula is apparent as “The 2016 National Survey of Hospitals found that 96 percent of Venezuelan hospitals reported not having all of the infant formula they needed to attend to patients” and “More than 63 percent reported having no formula at all.” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). The families that need formula are typically unable to afford it anyway due to its high cost and supply shortage. As a side note, medicines that are necessities in hospitals are also lacking as the hospital “had requested 193 necessary medications from the government agency responsible for distributing them to public hospitals. Only four of the 193 were delivered” (Kohut and Herrera, 2017). There is a feeling of helplessness as children die without the hospitals being able to help them because of the alarming lack of resources.

Venezuela’s current state of chaos will make it hard for the once-prosperous country to return to a well-functioning country. If the government doesn’t accept help or start to provide funds towards the healthcare system and the abolishment of malnutrition, the situation will continue to get worse. If the current situation continues, there will be many deaths as the citizens of Venezuela would not get adequate care and diseases and illnesses would start to take over. Not to mention food and water shortages.

A solution to the Venezuelan crisis is for the Venezuelan government to accept foreign aid. However, the current government does not recognize the gravity of the situation of its healthcare system and the scarcity of resources, and it will not do enough to improve its economy and the wellbeing of Venezuelans. The only way for change to happen is to get the current government out of power because they are what caused this crisis and they do not care about fixing it. Unfortunately, all of the recent past presidential elections have been rigged for Nicolas Maduro to win. This means that the people of Venezuela do not have the power to elect a new president. Considering that normal elections will not work, a possible solution to get Maduro out of power is to have the United Nations intervene. Having the citizens of Venezuela continuously ask them to help might cause the United Nations to take a more active role, possibly offering Maduro to live in exile and in exchange for leaving the country could be an option. Exile would get him out and let the citizens vote for a new president. Accepting foreign aid is a good first step, but to just rely on international countries to keep Venezuela stable is not beneficial. To pull their country out of its current precarious state, they must not solely rely on foreign aid. This will not solve their crisis in the long run because they would not be able to provide by themselves.

For the third and most effective solution, a series of actions, starting with international and internal pressure and ending with properly distributing these international funds, is the best solution to help their healthcare system and malnutrition problems. First, international and internal pressure could help sway the government's decision and ask and accept help. Some supplies that they should accept in particular are food, clean water, and other medical supplies for the hospitals including formula. Food and clean water could also be distributed to families in need to try to prevent malnutrition among the people. Foods with good nutrients and formula for babies would help the malnutrition issue severely. Another supply needed to treat malnutrition is feeding tubes which are necessary for patients who can't swallow. To start on the route to a better healthcare system, the government needs to acknowledge that there is an issue.

The government must accept international help and "Maduro needs to swallow his pride and admit that the domestic situation is not going to improve unless he makes drastic changes" (Stevens, 2017). It seems as though they are already on that path because in late March 2019, "President Nicolás Maduro decided to allow the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to enter the country with medical supplies for about 650,000 people" (Schreiber, 2019). This means that the government is now paying attention to the crisis and has started to accept help. Of course, " 'It's still a drop in the bucket compared to the 7 million or so people who are in desperate need,' Spiegel says. But he believes it is a sign that Venezuela's leader may begin acknowledging the crisis and opening the country up to assistance" (Schreiber, 2019). Although there is still a long way to go, after the supplies arrived, it was a good start on the way to rebuilding what was lost and helping the people of Venezuela.

The best plan is for Venezuelan political leaders to figure out how to acquire resources for themselves. Venezuela can accept help, but they can't completely rely on it and expect it forever. The government must act while they accept help. As a socialist country, they must distribute their funds more evenly and pay attention to the sectors that need more help, such as the healthcare system as well as improving food and water accessibility. This will take time but if the government plans out what they need to do to get there, Venezuela could be in a lessened state of chaos. Because of President Maduro's ignorance, "the arrival of the aid shipment constitutes an about-face by Mr. Maduro's government, which for years had denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis despite the nation having endured the deepest economic depression in modern history among countries not at war" (Kurmanaev and Herrero, 2019). The longer they wait to act, it will take longer and more effort to rise again. An idea for Venezuela and how they could acquire resources is to begin to try to make amends with countries like the United States and accept foreign investment to rebuild its production infrastructure. If the United States removes its sanctions on Venezuela and begins to purchase oil again, Venezuela could become the great oil exporter that it used to be. This would mean the Venezuelan government would have to discuss with The Office of Economic Sanctions Policy and Implementation of the United States as they are implementing foreign sanctions. Exporting oil is a natural resource that Venezuela has and according to an article from Forbes, "a country should use its natural resources to benefit its citizens, but you have to be willing to make the investments needed to keep the respective industries in good shape" (Rapier, 2019). The government not only needs to use what they have, but have to make smart investments first, build the country back up, and then to keep it that way.

These are the steps that Venezuela should follow to solve its healthcare system and malnutrition crisis and " 'There is no way in which Venezuela could come out of this by its own' " (Schreiber, 2019). They can't make it on their own as they are already deep into trouble, but with the proper help, Venezuela can get back up on their feet and will be able to support themselves.

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