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Haiti: Alleviating micronutrient deficiencies and protein-energy malnutrition through improved access to nutritious food, fortification, supplementation, school-feeding programs, nutrition education, emergency therapeutic feeding, etc.

Introduction:

I have always heard about people who have wanted to come to America because it is the land of opportunity and the answer to every person's dreams. As a seventeen-year-old high school junior living in rural Iowa, I always thought that dream to be ultimate financial success or national recognition for some outstanding achievement. I now find it that the definition of the American dream to many people around the world could be as simple as a balanced meal to eat and the assurance that there will be food to eat tomorrow.

My research has shown that Haiti is one such place that yearns for a balanced and full meal. In 2008, the *Miami Herald* published information gathered from UNICEF, stating that in Haiti, nine percent of children under the age of five were suffering from acute malnutrition and twenty-three percent were suffering from chronic malnutrition. It is also noted that in the poorest regions, chronic malnutrition can rise as high as forty percent.

Malnutrition is defined as the lack of proper nutrition caused by not having enough to eat, not eating enough of the right things, or being unable to use the food that one does eat. This is something that is truly affecting the country of Haiti. Hunger and malnutrition were widespread in Haiti before the devastating earthquake in 2010. Now they are even worse off. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, and one of the poorest in the world. This fact may be surprising to many Americans who are oblivious to food insecurities around the world simply because many Americans view the Caribbean as a vacation destination. While vacationing there, one would surely see the very rare, but positive points of this nation.

Country of Haiti:

Located in the Caribbean Sea, Haiti is a medium sized island that shares its eastern side with Dominican Republic to form the land mass known as Hispaniola. The total landmass of the country is 27,560 square kilometers, which means Haiti is slightly smaller than the state of Maryland in the United States. The capital of Haiti is Port-au-Prince. With the equator nineteen degrees south, the country has a very tropical climate. The overall terrain of the island is rough, due to the mountains that are spread throughout the country. One of the downfalls though to living in Haiti is that it is in the middle of the hurricane belt, so tropical storms are not uncommon. Other natural disasters that can occur are floods, earthquakes, and droughts.

The country is also divided into ten departments, comparable to how the United States is divided into states. The biggest department is Artibonite, and the smallest is Nippes. The departments are divided into arrondissements, like a state is divided into counties. Communes are third-level divisions. This compares to how a county is divided into townships.

According to the CIA World Factbook, Haiti has a population of 9,893,934 people, with the median age being 21.6 years old. Haiti is ranked 70th for the highest birth rate and 94th for highest death rate. The

current life expectancy of an average Haitian is 62.51 years old, which is actually not that bad, compared to other third world countries. The official language of the country is French, but many rural people speak a spin-off of French, known as Creole.

Ethnicity is not extremely diverse in Haiti. Ninety-five percent of the country is black, and the other five percent is a mixture of mulatto and white. Fifty-two percent of Haitians live urbanely, which means the majority of the country reside in rural areas. However, many of these people have been torn apart by conflict and natural disasters that has left them homeless, jobless, and with the inability to properly grow agricultural crops.

Lifestyle and Education:

Small families are very common in Haiti. The average family has five members: mother, father, and three children. It is not uncommon for a man to have more than one wife. For the country as a whole, about ten percent of men have more than one wife. A regular meal consists of rice and beans. Some other traditional, rural foods are sweet potatoes, manioc (tropical tree root), yams, corn, pigeon peas (plant seed), cowpeas (plant seeds), bread, and coffee. Haitians usually eat two meals a day, with fruit being between meal snacks.

A typical farm is about three acres. The crops produced are coffee, sugarcane, bananas, and/or rice. The husband is in charge of providing the sole income. The wife is in charge of cooking, cleaning, and gathering food and water. Once the crop is harvested, the women go to the market to sell in exchange for household food. Overall, rural households spend almost sixty percent of their income on food. The average family of six makes less than five hundred dollars a year (Haiti Countries and Their Cultures). This is an alarming statistic. Due to the struggles with food insecurity and lack of access to clean water, the people of Haiti are suffering to properly survive.

At the age of about seven or eight, if the family has enough money, children usually go to primary school. The average Haitian child will spend less than four years in school due to school expenses accounting for about forty percent of income for low-income families. Overall, thirty five percent Haitian youth are illiterate.

Health Issues:

Haitians healthcare issues are not any better than their education problems. According to the CIA World Factbook, there is less than one doctor per eight thousand people. That is absolutely outrageous. What all parents strive for is for their children to be healthy. This is something that cannot even be thought about because doctors are almost impossible to find. Due to the lack of doctors, many small communities have different kinds of “healers”. These include leaf doctors, granny midwives, injection specialists, and spiritual healers.

Infectious diseases are a huge worry in Haiti. The degree of risk of potentially developing an infectious disease is extremely high. The most infectious diseases that Haitians contract are water and foodborne illnesses. These include bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever. Dengue fever and malaria are vectorborne diseases that are also common in Haiti, as well as the water contact disease known as leptospirosis. HIV/AIDS is also a major problem. As of 2009, there have been 120,000 people in the country living with HIV/AIDS, ranking Haiti number thirty-seven, compared to the rest of the world. Also as of 2009, there have been 7,100 deaths resulting from HIV/AIDS (Haiti CIA). Compared to the rest of the world, Haiti ranks in that category at twenty-nine.

Today, Haiti is facing a huge problem with cholera. The country has been in a cholera epidemic since October in 2010. The strange part is that before October, there had never been a cholera case reported in the country. Since that time, cholera has killed about 8,000 people and sickened at least 646,000 (Ivers). After an investigation, it was determined that the cause of the disease came from contamination of the Meye Tributary of the Artibonite River. The source of the outbreak is thought to have come from a United Nations camp, but investigations are currently pending. On February 27th, 2013, Haiti's minister of health, Florence Guillaume, announced that the country would expand access to the cholera vaccine, so that prevention will become more stable.

Agriculture and Industry:

Haiti's economy relies heavily on agriculture. Sixty-six percent of the laboring population is dependent on farming. The major cash crops of Haiti are coffee and sugarcane. All crops are cultivated with simple hand tools. Sugarcane plantations would be the only place to possibly use a plow or animal power. Other crops that are grown include rice, corn, manioc, and sweet potatoes. Natural disasters and limited access to modern agricultural tools have led Haitians to use inadequate farming practices, resulting in poor yields.

Livestock is common on farms, though there are usually only a few animals. Animals that are usually found on the farm are goats, pigs, chickens, and cattle. Livestock is mainly not used as a food source, but rather as a kind of savings account. Livestock is often sold or slaughtered to pay for marriage, medical emergencies, schooling, or seeds for crops.

Industries in the country include textiles, sugar refining, flour milling, and cement. Haiti's unemployment rate is 40.6%, ranking the country at 188 compared to the world. Due to the high unemployment rate, it is not difficult to believe that 80% of the country lives below the poverty line (Malnutrition in Haiti).

Barriers:

There are a lot of barriers that are preventing the country's improvement. In agriculture practice, one of the barriers is farmland. Only one third of the land is considered suitable for cultivation. Approximately eighteen percent of the land is used as pasture. Another barrier in agriculture is lack of access to safe water. If crops do not have clean water, they will not grow to their full extent and there will be less food for people to eat. Another major barrier for Haiti is the aftermath that earthquake Tomas left in 2010. Even now, in 2013, there is still major damage to the whole country that makes it hard for people to get around and try to improve their living conditions.

Still another barrier is gaining adequate nutrition. I believe that nutritional deficits are not caused by inadequate knowledge, but by poverty. If people in Haiti had more money, I am quite sure that the first thing they would buy would be food for their families. Due to the inadequate nutrition, people are suffering from malnutrition and infectious diseases. The number of doctors in the country is also a barrier for people to have access to healthcare the overall health of the nation. Something important to realize is that each one of these barriers affect each other. If you knock down one barrier, the others will begin to crumble. The hard part is finding solutions to get rid of the barriers.

Conflict and Government:

The conventional long name for Haiti is the Republic of Haiti. Haiti has a republic type government. A republic government is a form of government in which the country is considered a public matter, not the private concern or property of the ruler. Haiti was originally owned by France, but gained its

independence on January 1st, 1804. This day serves as their Independence Day. The latest constitution was approved in March of 1987, with this being their twenty-third constitution. The highest position in the country is the Chief of State, who currently is President Michel Martelly (as of May 2011). The next position in line is the head of government, who is Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe.

Elections take place every five years for the president, who is elected by popular vote. There are two branches of the government: legislative and judicial. The legislative branch consists of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The judicial branch consists of the Supreme Court. There are many different political parties in Haiti. The most common is Fanmi Lavalas, who claim to invest in education and health care, but refuse monetary measures and have been excluded from Haitian elections since 2004.

Malnutrition in Food Security:

The factor I chose is malnutrition. I personally believe that malnutrition does not affect food security, but food security affects malnutrition. Like I said before about the barriers, everything is connected in some way. If you gain agricultural productivity, you gain food availability. Adequate diet for the people in this nation has always been a challenge. It seems that just when a concept is beginning to show improvement in this problem, another setback occurs such as a hurricane, earthquake, flooding or drought, or the current outbreak of cholera. I believe the true solution to have a sustained and sufficient food source is to first address the challenges I mentioned. Although it may not show immediate improvement, I believe long-term solutions will come with education and preparedness.

Solution:

There are many different ways to approach fighting malnutrition. Again, malnutrition is connected to everything. If you improve one area, all the rest are affected and will improve as well, like the domino effect. Living above the poverty level can simply be having food, shelter, and household items enough to meet people's basic survival needs. This may not be easy to achieve and once this level is reached, it may be difficult to maintain. Poor populations are the most vulnerable to further disaster. Care must be taken, so somehow we need to lay a foundation so once a comfortable level of living is reached, future generations can also benefit.

Long-term solutions are difficult in Haiti because this nation is always at the mercy of the weather. Obviously, nothing can be done to alter nature, but we can prepare the nation better to deal with disasters. Educating and disaster preparedness training could restore a nation's economic health more quickly after a disastrous setback. Health clinics could also be placed periodically throughout the country in both urban and rural areas to provide first aid training and kits available for the public to use. The National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians (NOAH) is an international organization that focuses on providing medical relief for citizens and training for Haitian medical professionals. This is a great example of an organization that would provide medical advancements to the country, which would benefit all Haitians.

Infrastructure is vital to reach economic health and independence. Adequate roads and bridges must provide access to food markets so goods can be sold. Currently, the infrastructure in Haiti is poor or non-existent. As with any economic structure, commodities must have an appropriate and cost-effective way to reach its destination if the seller is to reap any benefit at all.

Deforestation and soil erosion has left much of the nation barren. When it rains, the water is not easily absorbed. Also, the topsoil is not protected, so the nutrient-rich soil is washed away. In attempts to reverse this process, several non-profit organizations provide the funding and training needed to plant fruit and nut trees. Coffee and shade tree seedlings will also be planted. The trees could then provide

protection of the field from wind and rain. Another approach is to grow a variety of crops and keep a diverse mix of livestock so that if one fails, they can rely on something else.

Humanitarian organizations around the world have had a huge positive impact on Haiti and other countries in similar peril. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to do hands-on work with one such organization, Feed My Starving Children based in St. Paul, Minnesota. This non-profit group packages food to be sent to third world countries in need, including Haiti. Much of this food is being used in school-feeding programs to provide a nutrient packed meal to children at least three times each week. My community has hosted a packing event twice, preparing over 250,000 dry packaged meals, which will feed vast numbers of people. I have been directly involved with both the fundraising and the actual packing on both occasions. My eyes were truly opened as I fully realized the plight of individuals, especially children around the globe.

Another factor, which would positively affect economics, is to create conditions where smallhold farmers have access to adequate financing. Humanitarian organizations are developing community credit funds, which will allow provisions for start-up grants. The downside of this is there is always a fear that funds in programs developed by humanitarian organizations will end up in the pockets of politicians. Transparency International, a group that studies government corruption, rates Haiti's government as one of the world's most corrupt and least effective.

Lambi Fund of Haiti is a Haitian based organization that strives to help Haitians in order to strengthen society. This will provide the foundation necessary to develop a democracy. Two of their main project areas are animal husbandry and environment. Both of these areas provide training for farmers to strengthen their agricultural practices to provide higher yields and healthier livestock, which will then result in a bigger income for the families and less hungry people.

Again, education is necessary so that farmers will realize the value of conservation practices, which results in greater crop production, higher yields, and effective breeding programs to maintain livestock numbers. They must have better access to modern tools and seeds to become self-sufficient and produce more food through productive agriculture, vegetable gardens, and raising livestock.

Conclusion:

Norman Borlaug once said, "...the first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind. Food is the moral right of all who are born into this world." Norman Borlaug was one of the first people who really understood what was going on in the world with malnutrition. During his lifetime, due to his determination to help end world hunger, he saved as many as one billion people. Fighting hunger is something that we need to do as a global community.

Even though this process may be a struggle, it is not impossible. Each of us has a global, and more specifically, a moral obligation to be responsible citizens of the world and help others in need. The first step in the solution to any problem is accurate exposure and a full understanding of the challenges. Awareness of situations as acute and damaging as malnutrition could bring like-minded persons together who collectively may create effective solutions. I aspire to be on such a team in my lifetime.

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