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Guatemala, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Guatemala: Improving Nutrition

Life in Guatemala is never easy. As one of the poorest countries in Latin America, people in this corner of the world are far from living a luxurious life (Global). About 1.3 million Guatemalan families, roughly 50% of the population, are involved in the agrarian business (Abbott). A normal life for them includes 44-hour shifts a week, working on farms or walking in treacherous conditions to find clean water with nothing but tortillas and beans to eat (Thyberg; “Guatemala - Working Conditions”). On top of long days and little nutrition, Guatemalans are not allowed to drink the water in their communities as it may cause upset stomachs or infection; so, they stick to coffee (Thyberg). No water and little nutritional value in the food they consume causes many problems in a Guatemalan diet. Guatemalans do not obtain the nutrients they need; Guatemala’s rate of chronic malnutrition is one of the highest in the world. Almost 43.6% of children under five are malnourished in Guatemala (“Malnutrition”). Families in Guatemala are incredibly large. Unlike most Latin and Central American families, Guatemalan families rarely include extended family and usually consist of a mom, a dad, and their children (“Guatemalans”). However, the average number of children born to a woman is usually six; making the household crowded and food insecurity a chronic concern (“Guatemalans”). With all tillable land farmed – and then some - the problem with food insecurity in Guatemala seems to be in the quality of the food provided, not the quantity.

Health care infrastructure is one of the poorest aspects of Guatemala’s society. As of 2009, there are approximately 0.932 physicians and 0.897 midwives or nurses per 1,000 residents in Guatemala (“Country Cooperation Strategy”). As of 2010, the number one cause of death is acute lower respiratory infections (“Global Health-Guatemala”). The acute lower respiratory infections are usually caused by viruses, but can be caused by bacteria (“Respiratory Tract Infections”). They are spread easily through direct and indirect contact, and since Guatemalans live so close to one another, infections spread easily. Other diseases that are extremely common in Guatemala are usually food or waterborne diseases or ones that are caused by insects: hepatitis A, hepatitis E, typhoid fever, malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, and Lassa fever (“Guatemala Major Infectious Diseases”). These diseases are hard to cure when money and treatments are not available. The health care system in Guatemala still continues to rely on fees paid by the patients and healthcare is not subsidized by the government, and people do not have the out-of-pocket money that is needed to keep the health care facilities functioning (“Country Cooperation Strategy”).

Another factor contributing to Guatemala’s poverty is education. People in Guatemala usually receive about four years of education before having to go work in order to make enough money to support their household (“Guatemala’s Opportunity”). Surprisingly, the most illiterate and uneducated population in Guatemala is the indigenous group (“Guatemala”). This group of Guatemalans are among the poorest and most unschooled residents of Guatemala; with the illiteracy rate being 31.1% in women 15 years of age and older and 59% among older indigenous women (“Guatemala”). Guatemala’s 36-year bloody war has had a lasting impact on women and education. This tragedy led to the mistreatment of women and their rights in the country, rights mainly revolving around education (Miller). Of the two million children living in Guatemala that aren’t in school, most are poor girls living in rural areas (Global). There is hope, however. As of 2008, the female primary school enrollment rate has improved to 93% and the female

secondary school enrollment rate to 37%; however, this is still the lowest in all of Latin America (“Education in Guatemala”). Not only have female enrollment rates improved, but male enrollment rates have as well. The primary school enrollment rate for males increased to 97% and the secondary school enrollment rate improved to 40% (“Education in Guatemala”). The overall literacy rate in Guatemala is still only 70.6%, which is extremely low compared to the US and Cuba, whose literacy rate is 99% (“Education in Guatemala”). Looking at the difference in percent rates, inequities between genders is evident. Education is an extremely important factor in any child’s life; with barriers blocking the way for the children in Guatemala, they are deprived of a life full of academic wonder. Along with this, education has a huge impact on the diet and nutrition a Guatemalan receives; without proper knowledge, the people in the area do not know how to correctly feed themselves and their children.

Furthermore, many Guatemalans are unsure how to use their unusual and difficult land to grow nutritious food and crop. The terrain of Guatemala is not necessarily suitable for growing crops. Parts of Guatemala consist of tropical areas and others consist of mountains and rugged landscapes (Arguerta). The people of Guatemala have changed their agricultural practices because of this and now more farmers are starting to grow crops along the mountains. Only 17.5% of Guatemala’s land is used for the growing of crops; this 17.5% contributes 23% of the monetary value of all the finished goods and services in Guatemala, 75% of export earnings, and gives jobs to 50% of the labor force (“Guatemala – Agriculture”). The typical farm in Guatemala usually grows coffee or sugarcane and is usually about 3.7 acres (“Rural Poverty Portal”). These two commodities of crops are what bring in the most money for the country of Guatemala. In 1999, the amount of exported crops included 15,459,000 tons of sugarcane and 200,000 tons of coffee (“Guatemala – Agriculture”). Running hand in hand with the fact that it is hard to grow suitable crops is the chronic malnutrition rate. The chronic malnutrition percentage for children under 5 is extremely high, almost 50%, and this is because families lack the resources to produce or purchase nutritious meals (“Agriculture”). Moreover, it is crucial that the children of Guatemala are targeted for improved nutrition.

There are major barriers in Guatemala that prevent improvement of agricultural productivity, employment at a living wage, and access to food markets and adequate nutrition. There are barriers to making a living wage because the average Guatemalan works 45 hours a week and makes \$1.58 per hour; a “wealthy” person make \$2 per hour (Alisha). This is the salary that most of the citizens make and 75% of Guatemalans are below the poverty line (Alisha). The amount of weekly income that comes in to a household is far from being able to support the large numbers of people; which is why many children begin working younger. There are barriers to agricultural productivity because of the terrain in Guatemala and how it varies everywhere. Agricultural productivity is also hard because many farmers cling to the traditional techniques and do not want to change their ways. Guatemalans also face the challenge of being able to access food. Food availability is very poor in Guatemala because most of the larger markets are located in the city and the roads to get to the city are falling apart. There are many challenges that Guatemalans must face just to meet their basic needs of receiving a healthful diet.

Another challenge with the chronic malnutrition rate in Guatemala is that the involvement of the government with this issue is very little. The problem of food insecurity in Guatemala went unrecognized until a couple years ago when international press started focusing on it. Many of the rural poor people also consider it a part of who they are, one article says, “We’ve always eaten frijol and tortillas, and drunk coffee. Babies get sick and mothers die in childbirth—it has always been this way” (it (Our Neighbors, Ourselves: Guatemala’s Chronic Malnutrition Crosses Borders)). The people of Guatemala do not realize the food they eat provides little to no nutrition and is actually hurting them in the end. Along with severing education for women, the 36-year war in Guatemala caused basic services – electricity, water

sanitation, technology, etc. – to not reach remote areas making it hard for these individuals to be and stay healthy (Our Neighbors, Ourselves: Guatemala’s Chronic Malnutrition Crosses Borders). The normality of malnutrition is what’s making it hard for the government to recognize this as a major problem. Attention from other countries and people is bringing awareness to leaders in Guatemala that the problem of malnutrition is an issue and needs to be fixed.

With little help from the government, the idea of foreign aid is usually brought to the table. The United States planned funding for Guatemala in 2017 is \$145,105,000; this money will go towards programs that help with violence, poverty, malnutrition, and other problems (Guatemala Foreign Assistance). This assistance will also focus on enhancing agriculture and providing Guatemalans with different necessities. Although the US does its best to give the money evenly, it still seems the issue of malnutrition isn’t getting the help it needs. About 14% of this year’s aid (\$20,000,000) will go towards improving the health in Guatemala. The problem with any foreign aid being given out by the United States is the idea that the US needs to help itself before helping others. It boils down to the fact that the US does have the resources needed to help Guatemala and it is powerful enough to make a positive change. With foreign aid, Guatemala is starting to get itself off the ground, but it is not just foreign aid that is going to help Guatemala get to where it needs to be.

A solution to food insecurity in Guatemala would be to address the problem of malnutrition directly. Direct aid could come in the form of nutrient supplements to balance or add to what a Guatemalan person considers a “healthy” diet. Mission Guatemala is a faith-based, non-profit organization located in Panajachel, Guatemala. Tom Heaton is the founder of this project and has worked with a plethora of people to keep the program running and it continues to thrive. Mission Guatemala’s goals are to make sure children do not die of hunger, provide a clinic and dental area for people of all races and ages, make sure mothers have the vitamins needed for pregnancy and for their children, rates of illness and death due to respiratory infections become a thing of the past, people learn how important sanitation and nutrition is, and water becomes safe and accessible to all. (Mission and Vision). Mission Guatemala pairs up with Kids Against Hunger; they work to get prepackaged meals to children and families. The Kids Against Hunger meals are packed full of proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, and amino acids that are necessary to a child’s health (Heaton). The amount of food that comes in a package is suitable for feeding the average sized family, and only requires boiling water to make (Heaton). The fact that it needs water to make becomes a concern considering the issue of water pollution and access to water in Guatemala. Another solution that Mission Guatemala has begun to implement is a feeding program at their school, Nueva Esperanza. Mission Guatemala collaborates with the parents of two communities to feed over 150 children (“Feeding Centers”). The food served to the children is packed full of nutrients and along with the meal, the children receive a vitamin tablet with their lunch. As well as a meal, Mission Guatemala is able to provide school supplies and free access to the clinic to every child at the school (Oden). The clinic is also open to the regular people of the village and they are able to get the help and medicine, if needed, there. This offer gives the Guatemalan children of this area an extremely hopeful future. Although the program targets a small group right now, the people of Mission Guatemala hope to expand their work to all children in all parts of Guatemala.

Feed the Dream is an organization that works with rural communities in Guatemala to help combat poverty issues and child malnutrition. The program was founded by Sandy Haggart in 2004 with one village and 150 children (Weigel). This organization provides balanced meals to children under five years of age and to women who are able to reproduce (“Who We Are”). Prenatal vitamins are given to those women who need them with the folic acid that is crucial when carrying a baby. A program this

organization does is educate the women on the importance of proper nutrition and how it can impact the life of them and their children. This is a huge step in the right direction since education and being educated is the base of every important value in someone's life. Feed the Dream also establishes nutritional centers in particular areas where they implement diverse crops and train others on how to keep the plants thriving. As of 2015, the organization is working eleven villages and 2,200 children; 23 villages have reach self-sustainability. These types of aid directly target and combat malnutrition in Guatemalan people by providing nutritious meals and educating the mothers on tools they need to properly nourish their children and prevent the damage chronic malnutrition can cause.

These two organizations are very successful because of the hard work each puts in with the villages and the people. Mission Guatemala and Feed the Dream work around the culture of Guatemalans, and aren't focused on completely changing the way the people do certain tasks. Both organizations are big on showing the natives how their solutions will help them, instead of stressing that they need to change their ways and move away from their natural tendencies. Mission Guatemala is always working to improve their feeding program and clinic with better formulas and technology. Feed the Dream cares so much for the people in the village and does their best to ensure they're getting quality help ("Who We Are"). Both organizations have a large number of volunteers that help in the villages to keep improving the lives of these people.

There are numerous solutions to child malnutrition in Guatemala, such as directly providing the people of Guatemala with the nutrients they need for proper health and development. Along with this, there are indirect ways to help Guatemalan's malnutrition rate – education being a major one. Education of all future generations is extremely important to solving the problem of food security. Education impacts the typical family in Guatemala in many different ways; most importantly, they don't know how to properly feed themselves and their children to get the proper nutrients because they are untaught on how it all works. Many family members do not get a quality education so they are uneducated on this simple idea. Children are often forced to leave school due to the need to provide family income (Global). Girls are taken away from their schooling at a very young age and become unknown to certain lifetime skills (Global). This affects the family because without education, the family does not know how to perform new agricultural techniques, budget their money, and know how to prepare food properly. In many poor communities, school fees for tuition, textbooks, uniforms and supplies are often too much for the family which can then lead to them being completely out of money (Global). The impact of education on the typical Guatemalan family is one that does not go away. Being educated on malnutrition and the impact it has on adulthood will really change a person and the future he/she has.

The ultimate goal in Guatemala that would be the most beneficial is self-sustainability. Self-sustainability allows the people in these communities to reach above and beyond the poverty line, and start to live a much healthier life. Eating nutritiously at home is vitally important when money isn't obtainable and a quick trip to the market isn't exactly available. These solutions could allow Guatemala to stop worrying about their malnutrition rate and how it affects their help, and begin to focus on bettering themselves as a country.

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