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Uganda, Malnutrition

Uganda: Eradicating Poverty and Malnutrition to Improve Food Security

We are living in the 21st century and are still facing hunger, impoverishment, and malnutrition every day. We sit in the lap of luxury with easy access to grocery stores and restaurants with an assortment of staples. Many have an excess of food and indulge in it. Others are famished and worrying about where or how they will get their next meal. It is time to make a change to end global hunger and poverty. The solution starts with you. With me. With emerging leaders and nations ready to take action to create change, justice and peace. Mother Theresa once said, “If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.” If we cannot end global hunger at once, then we will feed one nation at a time starting with Uganda.

The Republic of Uganda is a landlocked country located in Eastern Africa. It is bordered by neighboring countries of South Sudan, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Uganda is currently home to 43, 974, 791 people and is the thirty second largest country in the world by population (Worldometer). Comparatively, it is about the same size of Oregon, USA.

Uganda’s climate is tropical. Temperatures range anywhere from 25-29°C (77-84°F). The dry season is from December to February. The wet seasons are from September to November and March to May. Uganda has a natural abundance of water including vast lakes and vegetation that consists of savannah grasslands, woodlands, bushland, and tropical rainforest. While 80% of the country is arable, only 35% of it is being efficiently utilized for farming purposes. (Nations Encyclopedia).

The country’s primary exports and crops include coffee, tea, cotton, tobacco, maize, millet, beef, poultry, fish, and horticultural products. Currently, Uganda produces more food than it expends (World Food Programme) However, despite the abundance of available resources, 19.7% of its population lives below the poverty line. (World Food Programme). Many people suffer from malnutrition and are vulnerable to food insecurity. The World Food Prize defines malnutrition as “Deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person’s intake of energy, protein and nutrients”. According to the United Nations, food security occurs “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. Poverty has an effect on both malnutrition and food security as people cannot afford the nutritious food that they need, resulting in undernourishment and food insecurity.

The people of Uganda rely heavily on the agricultural sector. In Uganda, 87% of its population lives in rural areas and is involved in some level of agriculture. (Our Africa). Industry employs 5% of the labor force, and services employ the remaining 13%. (visualgeography.com). The minimum age to work is 18, but regardless of these laws, children often end up working to help meet their family’s needs. The wages in Uganda are extremely low. Extra income from farming makes a huge difference in helping households provide for necessities such as food, schooling, proper health care, etc. The minimum wage in Uganda is \$95/year USD or 6,000 shillings/month in Ugandan currency. This means that the average Ugandan earns less than \$1/day USD. 121 out of 197 people earn minimum wage or lower. (Minimum-Wage.org).

The average farm size in Uganda is 1.51 ha or 3.73 acres - an equivalency to the size of three football fields. Nationally, Uganda has 4,076,293 holdings on this size of farmland. (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). The average family size is 4.7 people per family. (Uganda Bureau Statistics). Traditionally, the men are the providers and the head of the house. They make all the decisions and are viewed as superior to the women and girls within the household. Mothers are responsible for tending to the domestic duties such as cooking, housekeeping, and child rearing. The girls' help their mothers prepare meals and cook food over open fires, and the boys tend to the farming duties.

Ugandan dwellings are of poor quality because of the high poverty rates. This means that dwellings, many of which are in the rural regions, are lacking in proper infrastructure, clean water, toilets, electricity, and telephones. Many Ugandans live in overcrowded houses in slums with thatched huts and mud or wattle walls. There is no access to electricity, clean water, and proper sanitation. Dwellings in urban regions are made of brick.

Most people produce their own food and have only two meals a day: lunch and supper. A typical diet is composed of plantain (sweet potatoes and cassava) and cereals (maize, millet, and sorghum). Sometimes pulses, nuts, and green leafy vegetables compliment the meal. Meat and chicken stews are popular in Uganda when they are served with ugali (a hard maize porridge) or matoke (a cooked banana/plantain mash). Local fish, such as the Nile perch and the ngege tilapia, are important foods because of their high nutritional value. They are low in fat, high in protein and high in vitamins, particularly high in Vitamin A. However, despite the easy access and the amount of fish within the country, few people consume it.

Another problem in Uganda is its struggling health care system. According to Uganda's ministry of health, there is one doctor to every 300 000 people. (Africa and The World). Currently only 2 % of Ugandans have health insurance, which means that 43 million people out of 43.9 million have no health coverage (Center For Health Market Innovations). Many Ugandans, who earn less than a dollar per day, cannot afford health care. Health facilities and hospitals have shortages of staff, medical equipment, drugs and supplies that are needed to provide treatment. Lack of funds contributes to the quality of treatment given to patients. The Ugandan government has taken specific measures to ensure that all Ugandans will receive health insurance by 2025. However, for many Ugandans without health insurance, 2025 is too far away.

Uganda is a presidential republic with executive, judicial, and legislative branches. The government runs as a democracy and multi-party system. Uganda's current president is Yoweri Museveni who has been in power for 20 years. Parliament has 332 to 375 elected members, with designated seats for women, military, youth and those with disabilities. (The State House of Uganda). The distribution of wealth is uneven as much of Uganda's wealth goes to government officials instead of improving health care or education. Many believe that the government is over governed and very unproductive. Others think reducing the number of parliament members would release more funds to relevant issues including malnutrition and poverty as opposed to paying government officials.

Ugandans are competing for a limited number of well-paying jobs. Without a good education or the right connections, it is difficult to obtain one of these jobs. The youth contribute to 83% of Uganda's employment, working at home to tend the crops instead of attending school. (World Bank). As a result,

only 33% of Uganda's children complete primary school. (International Refugee Trust). In 1997, Uganda's government established universal primary education, giving all Ugandan children free primary schooling, and later in 2007, free secondary schooling. However, free government schools are small in number and a classroom easily averages 100 to 1 student teacher ratio. Teachers are overwhelmed and over-worked. As a result, kids are disadvantaged as they are not able to learn in the crowded, high stressed environment. Most of the population wants a better education than offered in the free government schools. Parents with money send their children to private schools where they pay tuition. Often, students from poor families cannot pay the private school fees and their children are forced to drop out of the private schools and/or attend the public school. This creates inequality between the rich and poor in the country. The public schools lack the resources needed to ensure that students are exposed to the whole curriculum. These difficulties stem from lack of government funding that has resulted in students receiving a better education in private schools than in public ones.

The present status of malnutrition is improving although at a very slow rate. Ugandans, until recently, have received little education about the types of foods that will reduce malnutrition. The poverty rate is declining, dropping from 30.1% in 2006 to 19.7% in 2013. (The World Bank). This is because Uganda has swiftly been able to reduce the share of its people living on \$1/day from 53.2% in 2006 to 34.6% in 2013. (The World Bank). However, even with this reduction in poverty, food security remains problematic. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) states that, "33 % of children under five are stunted, 14% are underweight, and 5% are wasted...." Undernutrition puts Ugandans at a greater risk of dying from diseases and makes them vulnerable to poverty. Malnutrition affects people more in rural regions than in urban regions. Urban Ugandans have access to better jobs, health care, and education that helps to minimize malnutrition rates. Malnutrition affects women more than men. In part, this is because of Uganda's cultural norms and gender dynamics that are dominant in its rural communities.

Malnutrition affects Uganda's environment. In order to ensure that everyone's dietary needs are met, more food and higher nutrient based food must be produced. If done improperly this has the potential to put further stress on Uganda's resources and lead to resource degradation. To make the situation more severe is the fact that Uganda is on track to reach 100 million people by 2050 – almost tripling Uganda's present population. (World Food Programme). Uganda has an urgent need to increase food production and nutritional value of food produced to meet the needs of this fast growing population. The marginalized populations are disadvantaged and overlooked because of their status. As a result, they suffer from inequalities in education, health care, jobs, and food security. They struggle more than the majority to stay nourished and food secure because of the lack of available resources accessible to them. While poverty and malnutrition concerns in Uganda are still very serious, there has been improvement because of help from organizations and global awareness.

One of the most relevant solutions to end malnutrition and poverty is to broaden the horizons of education. As already stated, only 33% of Uganda's population graduates from primary school. This is a depressing percentile. Making the situation grimmer is the fact that of the 33% who do graduate from primary school many do not receive a quality education, as the public system is overtaxed and underfunded. And what about the remaining 67% of the population?

Increasing public awareness is a key to ending malnutrition and poverty in Uganda. Because of the country's lack of education, people are unaware of the importance of eating balanced, nutritious meals. They were never taught about the benefits of their very own resources. For instance, foods such as fish

and vegetables are traditional, common foods but no one knows the nutrients, vitamins, proteins, etc. in them that improve health. As mentioned earlier, Uganda is home to many lakes with an abundance of fish in them. The fish are full of nutritional value such as protein and vitamin A; however, many Ugandans do not eat fish. Vitamin A is a micronutrient in food that is essential to proper health and eyesight. Vitamin A on its own is not enough to sustain one's body, but Vitamin A Deficiency (VAD) could create catastrophes as severe as death, stunted growth and development, increases to risks of infection and severity of infection, and eye problems. Education about the benefits of fish, sustainable harvesting of the fish and a change in the attitude towards eating fish would go a long way in helping Ugandans meet their dietary needs.

While the majority of Uganda's population is involved in agriculture, many people would benefit from further education on the nutritional value of current crops, bio fortified crops and GMO crops. Through government funding and the help of organizations such as UNICEF, education awareness programs can be delivered to rural areas throughout Uganda. Presenters can organize sessions, teach classes, and give demonstrations to rural communities to encourage food security, reduce malnutrition and eradicate poverty. During these get-togethers, people will learn in a social environment the information they need to make the best choices on crop selection, agricultural practices and the dietary needs of their families.

Public education is vital to improving Uganda's food security. Bangladesh has tried this same approach and has made tremendous progress. UNICEF has reached out to communities of mothers and educated them on the importance of breastfeeding as well as eating and producing their own nutrient and protein rich food. Families have been more active and children play with more energy as they are getting stronger and healthier.

Another solution to improve food security is to help further educate farmers and workers within the agricultural sector on how to maximize yields, use efficient farming practices and select high nutrient value crops to promote economic growth. All this will not only increase the income for the farmers, but also increase the nutrient value of the food being produced.

The Food and Agricultural Organization in Uganda (FAO) can lead this project. Currently, FAO is working with the Government of Uganda to design and integrate policies and programs with the purpose of getting rid of hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. The government could partner with FAO and together they could make decisions as to what would be best and most beneficial for the country. The government can play a role in this project by setting aside money to address the challenges within the agricultural sector. This project can also be made possible with the help of microfinancing. Several organizations within Uganda offer "loans" to farmers to support the agricultural sector. There would be experts that would provide demonstrations and classes on how to maximize yields using bio fortified and GMO crops.

The disadvantages to these solutions are that they are long and slow processes. Mindsets have to be changed. Traditions have to be altered. Connections with communities and organizations have to be formed in order for the knowledge to be accepted and spread. Uganda's population is going to triple by 2050. These processes may be too slow to defeat Uganda's food insecurity on its own. The advantages to these solutions are many. It is affordable, sustainable, available to everyone, and applicable to the whole community. It will increase Uganda's economic wealth and overall health of its citizens. Success has

already been seen with the introduction and acceptance of bio fortified sweet potatoes in some communities to combat food insecurity. Further education is the key to success in adversity.

The road to end poverty and malnutrition to improve food security is difficult, but there is still hope. Hope that Uganda will become food secure, healthy, and safe. With the continuous support of non-profit organizations and the government, Uganda will have a brighter future.

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