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Costa Rica, Malnutrition

Costa Rica: Subsidizing Necessities Not Commodities

In Costa Rica malnutrition has led 51.5% of adults to be overweight, while 33.3% of children are underweight (Global Nutrition Report, 2020; Costa Rica- Child Malnutrition, 2021). The Central American country of Costa Rica is seeing a large percentage of deaths arise as a direct result of malnutrition or from events that could have been prevented by proper nutrition. The principle reason for this is that Costa Rica prioritizes growing commodity crops, since the country generates wealth through the trade of these commodity crops, while losing the battle of properly feeding its people.

Costa Rica is home to over 5.1 million people, as of January 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). The average Costa Rican family consists of 3 or 4 individuals (Population Reference Bureau, 2020). The typical dwelling of a Costa Rican family is a low-rise home or small apartment in urban areas (Van Velzer, 2015). A middle class family in Costa Rica earns approximately 9,000 United States Dollars (USD) (O'Donnell, 2021). Costa Ricans have access to private health care plans if they can pay \$1300 USD a year (Health Care, 2015). Only 82% of Costa Ricans have access to a reliable source of clean drinking water (Shah, 2020). According to The World Bank, 100% of Costa Ricans have access to electricity (The World Bank, 2018). The typical diet of Costa Ricans consists of mostly rice and beans accompanied by some sort of vegetable, typically cabbage, tomatoes, or carrots, with meat being consumed scarcely on special occasions (Monge-Rojas, n.d.). Costa Rica's government is a Democratic Republic with a President, two Vice Presidents, a 26 member cabinet and a Legislative Branch (Costa Rica Government, n.d.). When it comes to agriculture, 9.9% of land in Costa Rica is deployed for crop production, with the average size of farms being less than 25 acres (Costa Rica-Agriculture, n.d.-a).

Some of the highest paying jobs in Costa Rica are in the agricultural sector, specifically in banana fields, since bananas provide \$1.22 Billion (USD) for the country and employ 140,000 Costa Ricans (Costa Rica-Agriculture, n.d.-b). 34.46% of land in Costa Rica is cultivated for farming, which is a decrease from previous years (Costa Rica- Agricultural Land, 2016). Unfortunately, the crops that take up most of this land are bananas, coffee, and sugar, which creates a disservice to the Costa Rican people (Costa Rica-Agriculture, n.d.-b). Since Costa Rica generates a lot of revenue from bananas they trade large quantities of them, along with the other major export which is coffee. The unfortunate result of exporting massive amounts of nutritious food, is leaving sugar to be the primary crop that enters the home of Costa Ricans, creating many dietary and health issues (Costa Rica-Agriculture, n.d.-b).

If the Costa Rican government were to provide its population with healthier food choices, up to 57% of deaths in the country could have been avoided (Country Report: Costa Rica, n.d.). For example, 27% of deaths in Costa Rica were a result of circulatory issues, which includes heart attacks, which can be prevented through a proper diet consisting of high protein and high fiber foods (Country Report: Costa Rica, n.d.). Since Costa Rica distributes mostly sugar to Costa Ricans instead of the country's various array of crops, it is hard for Costa Ricans to have access to the food that, when added to their diet, can

prevent circulatory issues that kill an alarming portion of Costa Ricans (Costa Rica-Agriculture, n.d.-b; Country Report: Costa Rica, n.d.). The Costa Rican Government had planned on funding small to medium sized farms to promote the production of staple crops such as rice, beans, potatoes, and milk, however these farmers are demonstrating frustration since many small scale farms are not receiving any assistance (Agricultural policies in Costa Rica, 2017; Long, 2010). The President of the Nation Assembly of Rice Producers, Oscar Campos, is quoted in responding to a question on subsidies for rice farms stating “Money in our pockets? None. Help from the government? Nothing.” showing that the farmers that generate the food for Costa Ricans have not received the money necessary to distribute nutritious food to the populous (Long, 2010). Campos goes on to explain that the larger farms that produce crops such as coffee and sugar, which generate billions of dollars for the economy, are recipients of these subsidies (Long, 2010). This creates a situation where the Costa Rican government is allowing for these non nutritious crops to be grown and supplied to the Costa Rican people, killing many of its own citizens.

For Costa Ricans farms to be able to supply their own people with nutritious food, the government must change their value system and start providing the farmers with the appropriate subsidies to grow crops such as rice, beans, milk, and potatoes which can all combat the issues of underweight children and overweight adults. One idea to raise the funds for farm subsidies can be to tax sugary food products which harm the health of individuals, since it will decrease the number of individuals buying the sugary products, taking care of the overweight population, but still generating enough money to give farms the money they need to get nutritious foods to the people. To demonstrate the potential of increased revenue from a sugary food tax, it was discovered that if China were to implement a 1 yuan tax on sugary drinks, the country would see an increase in 73.6 billion yuans in revenues (Taxes on Sugary Drinks, 2017). By applying the same logistics, if Costa Rica were to place a \$1 USD tax on sugary drinks and foods, the country has the potential to increase national revenue by billions of dollars. This increase in revenue would provide the government with an excess of money that could be used to subsidize farms that grow fresh produce, livestock, and rice, which are not only staples of Costa Rican cuisine, but are vital in guiding Costa Rica into becoming a well nourished country. The Costa Rican government providing these farms with subsidies will allow farmers to obtain the resources they need to continue to yield large amounts of the crops they grow, and also have the supplies to distribute their goods throughout the nation. These subsidies would also lead to a decrease in price of freshly grown foods, since farmers would charge less and still have a profit, which has been proven to promote healthier eating habits, and decreased health issues in various nations around the world (An, 2013).

To implement the proposed taxes and wealth distribution properly, a morally responsible decision must come from the Costa Rican government to distribute the wealth through subsidies to small and medium-sized farms, and not provide all of the funding to the large-scale farms that produce the commodity crops that make Costa Rica billions of dollars. The best way to ensure that the government properly distributes these subsidies can be through the Costa Rican people pressuring the government to subsidize these small farms because of the direct and indirect benefits these subsidies will have on the people and the nation. The direct impacts of these subsidies will include better overall health among individuals, more job opportunities and higher wages (An, 2013). Better health among individuals will come from the increased supply of fresh produce and other farm raised foods, since farmers will have the means to grow more crops through access to more equipment, the ability to hire more workers, and the ability to expand their farms, all of which would become possible through an increase in monetary

support from the government. Through these farmers having more money to spend, in addition to an increased demand of their products, there will be an increased amount of job opportunities for Costa Ricans, as well as possibly leading to an increase in wages for the already 140,000 people that work in agriculture (Costa Rica- Agriculture, n.d.-b). The indirect benefits from these subsidies come from the benefits Costa Rica will obtain through having a healthier working population, increased job opportunities, and a better economy. By providing the country with more nutritious foods, Costa Rica will be breeding a healthier working population, which would in effect increase the work force and make the agriculture structure stronger by having more people to work on these farms. Currently, agriculture makes up 15% of Costa Rica's GDP, but by having a healthier and larger workforce Costa Rica can increase that percentage and even increase their GDP all together, since this increased workforce can be employed by the larger farms that grow the commodity crops. This increase in GDP can be used to fund more programs like in school lunch programs or healthcare, improving the quality of life in Costa Rica, even though it is already the happiest country according to The Happy Planet Index (Trejos, 2018). If Costa Rica were to effectively implement these plans, the country could serve as an example to the rest of Central America on how to combat the obesity and malnutrition rates in their adolescent and adult population and their younger population respectively.

Throughout Central America, 50 million children ages 5 and under are suffering from acute or wasting malnutrition, while 41 million children in the same age group are overweight or obese (Etienne, n.d.). These startling statistics prove that there needs to be reforms in the way of living in Central America to improve the health of the inhabitants of Central America, which can be made possible if Costa Rica were to serve as an example to its neighboring countries. Although Costa Rica has challenges ahead of them when it comes to defeating malnutrition, they have an advantage compared to other Central American nations in terms of social and economic stability, making it relatively easier for Costa Rica to defeat malnutrition as compared to the other tumultuous countries in Central America. Costa Rica shares its northern border with Nicaragua, which not only is in a current state of political and civil unrest, but has alarming malnutrition rates where 17% of children ages 5 and under are chronically malnourished (Borgen Project, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019). If Costa Rica were to help its neighbors in combating malnutrition, it could potentially create a better social climate in Nicaragua and prevent the influx of people into Costa Rica. Costa Rica's southern border is shared with Panama, where half of all indigenous children are malnourished (Persson, 2016). The issues in Costa Rica's neighboring countries do pose a potential issue for Costa Rica since if the people from Nicaragua and Panama rapidly migrated into Costa Rica, the country would be overwhelmed and rattle the country's social and economic constructs. Being that Costa Rica does not have a military and only has a national police, it would be hard for Costa Rica to control its borders, meaning that the prosperity of Costa Rica is just as important as the prosperity of Central America (Trejos, 2018). Overall, if Costa Rica was able to conquer the issue of malnutrition in its population, all of Central America would have the opportunity to start on a track of prosperity.

As Costa Rica battles with the reality that malnutrition has resulted in $\frac{1}{3}$ of its children ages 5 and under to be underweight and an adult population where the majority of adults are overweight or obese, Costa Rica needs to reevaluate how they subsidize their agricultural sector (Global Nutrition Report, 2020; Costa Rica- Malnutrition, 2021). By taxing sugary foods and drinks, Costa Rica would have a great increase in revenue, allowing them to subsidize small farms which grow fresh produce to provide

everyone in Costa Rica with affordable healthy foods. Overall, by properly funding the agricultural sector, Costa Rica can end malnutrition among their people and serve as an example to other Central American countries, providing some stability to the region.

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