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Malawi, Malnutrition

The Warm Heart of Africa

Malawi is known as the “Warm Heart of Africa” because of its kind people, breathtaking landscape and incredible wildlife. Although the country is known for its beautiful scenery and popular clear waters, the country’s people are suffering. Without proper sources of wheat, corn, soy, and rice, the Malawian people are malnourished and starving. Malnutrition is a dreadful lack of access to proper food, and causes major imbalances of energy, protein, and nutrients. Malawi is lacking diversity in food sources. Specifically, the country is in desperate need of micronutrients - rich foods that are necessary for human survival. This is the cause of malnutrition in the Malawian people. It is time for wealthier nations to step up and support Malawi to become self-sustaining.

Malawi’s population is roughly 18.1 million people and approximately 85% reside in rural areas (Learn). Malawi’s most common crops include tobacco, tea, cotton, sugar, coffee and maize (New). Maize is an essential crop for survival and is the leading source of food consumption. The average Malawi family's household consists of four to five members (Hoffman). Most Malawi families live in a mud compounded house with thatched roofs (Housing). The standard family diet consists of combinations of cereal made of maize, cassava, and potatoes (National). At almost every Malawi breakfast, lunch and dinner table is a traditional basic dish known as nsima. Nsima is a thick porridge made from maize-flour (Social). Nsima is oftentimes compared to unflavored, congealed grits. This staple food is inexpensive and readily available. Nsima is normally served with ndiwo. Ndiwo is a side dish containing protein ingredients such as fish, beans, eggs, and possibly greens. However, because nsima makes up such a large portion of the average diet and has such little nutritional value, the Malawians face severe malnutrition. Access to more diverse and sustainable sources of nutrition is vital.

The majority of Malawi’s food supplies come from local farms, side markets and street shops. Although Malawians have access to roads and local markets, they pale in comparison to those of first world nations. Many Malawians are forced to travel extreme distances just to find acceptable food. This is a major contributor to Malawi’s malnutrition crisis. The people also have very little access to electricity. Only about 9% of Malawi’s total population has access to electricity. This has a direct and adverse effect on their health (Suhlrie). A lack of education is another major contributor to the country's malnutrition problem. Modern transportation systems, electricity and education are all opportunities many citizens of western countries take for granted. The people of Malawi simply do not have access to the opportunities that could assist in solving the malnutrition problem. If they had better access to transportation, electricity and education, Malawian’s overall nutrition would improve.

Malawi’s population is growing quickly. In turn, the devastation from malnutrition has been consistently expanding. Malnutrition is when a person is getting too little or too much of certain nutrients (Braizer). There are about 2.9 million children under five in Malawi (Child). Over 142,000 of them suffer from acute malnutrition and 42.4%, or 1.2 million, are chronically malnourished (Valid). Malnutrition oftentimes leads to serious health issues and diseases. Some serious medical issues attributed to malnutrition include stunted growth, eye and vision problems, diabetes and heart disease (Braizer).

Malnutrition is a serious issue affecting billions throughout the entire world. People who are affected by malnutrition often have deficiencies in vitamins and minerals, especially iron, zinc, vitamin A and iodine (Micronutrients). Globally, about 1 out of 3 people are affected by some form of malnutrition (Adebiyi). Malnutrition is a non-stop spreading cycle. When people are not being fed correctly they cannot function as well and therefore cannot produce the proper food for others. Eradicating poverty is key to ending malnutrition in all forms. At the same time, eradicating malnutrition is also key to economic development: A well-nourished population is a healthier and more productive population (Ending). Food insecurity or a lack of access to sufficient and affordable food are linked to malnutrition in both developing and developed nations. Particularly in Malawi, malnutrition has been ongoing for far too long, and it is time for a global change.

Currently Malawi's government is launching a policy referred to as Malawi's National Nutrition Policy 2016 – 2020. This campaign focuses on reducing the number of children under five who are stunted by 20%; and increasing funding, commitment, and accountability for nutrition (The Fight). This may be a great start to the end of malnutrition for Malawi and its people.

There are two additional new policy priorities linked to combating malnutrition in Malawi. The first policy is prevention of undernutrition by having private sector investments in production, processing, and marketing of high-quality nutritious foods including complementary foods (The fight). The second policy is focused on the treatment and control of acute malnutrition. This consists of government ownership and financing of interventions on the management of acute malnutrition through a lifecycle approach that targets children, adolescents and adults (The fight). These policies are a great first step the leadership of Malawi has started for their people. However, there is still so much to be done for the Malawians.

The majority of those suffering from malnutrition in Malawi are mothers and children. Ensuring that mothers are well nourished is another important action to take in Malawi. Malnourished mothers are more likely to have malnourished babies. An underweight mother risks having a baby with low birth weight. Mothers and children are the foundation of every country. In order for a country to thrive it needs healthy and productive mothers and children.

A major vitamin that Malawian mothers and children are lacking due to malnutrition is vitamin A. Vitamin A is an essential micronutrient, along with other vitamins, minerals and other compounds (Gilbert). Essential micronutrients cannot be manufactured by the human body and therefore it has to be included in our diet. Vitamin A supports the daily replacement of skin cells and ensures that tissues such as the conjunctiva are able to produce mucous and provide a barrier to infection (Gilbert). Vitamin A is also essential for vision under conditions of poor lighting, for maintaining a healthy immune system, for growth and development and for reproduction (Gilbert). Vitamin A supports many systems in the body. The people need vitamin A in their diets and as of now are not getting the proper amount.

Vitamin A deficiency is a major contributor to the mortality of children under five. By improving the vitamin A status of deficient children through supplementation enhances their resistance to disease (Gilbert). Vitamin A supplementation has been used in a couple different struggling areas around the world and has been proven to work.

Providing women and children access to vitamin A in Malawi is an important step to take in the fight against malnutrition. By attacking one major cause of malnutrition we can slowly overcome the problem as a whole. Delivery of high-dose supplements remains the principal strategy for controlling vitamin A deficiency. Food-based approaches, such as food fortification and consumption of foods rich in vitamin A, are becoming increasingly feasible but have not yet ensured coverage levels similar to supplementation in most affected areas. Of course by having the proper sources of food would be ideal for destroying malnutrition it is difficult. By providing two doses of vitamin A for the children of Malawi will help protect the children more effectively and quicker. The dosages could be delivered by outreach and campaign-style events held throughout the community. While routine health services try to reach every child those programs are unlikely able to reach everyone. This solution to the vitamin A deficiency is the major step needed to be taken in order to end malnutrition. It has worked before in many different developing countries. It is now Malawi's turn.

Another strategy that could be used in combating malnutrition in Malawi is to increase access to education opportunities to the people regarding ways to obtain sources of vitamin A for themselves, their families, and children. At every gathering before providing the vitamin A supplements, a doctor or health professional should be present to provide a lesson on creating different sources of vitamin A and other nutrients the citizens are lacking. The people can be taught that there are two forms of vitamin A in human diets: preformed vitamin A and provitamin A carotenoids (Gilbert). Preformed vitamin A is found in foods from animal sources, including dairy products, fish, and meat (Gilbert). Provitamin A includes carrots, broccoli, cantaloupe, and squash. Volunteers can distribute packets of seeds that the people can use to plant as another source of vitamin A. By providing nutrition plants and vegetables the people will not only be getting better intake of vitamin A but other nutrients they are lacking, and they can learn to take their nutrition into their own hands and become self-sustaining.

The people of Malawi are suffering from malnutrition. Most importantly vulnerable children and their mothers are suffering. But this can be corrected. They are in need of increased access to vitamin A. Human bodies are incapable of producing this major nutrient. Vitamin A comes directly from a person's food sources (Gilbert). In Malawi, vitamin A is lacking because their normal diets consist of cereal based meals from maize (Learn). Although maize is a great source of food it lacks essential nutrients. A step to be taken to end malnutrition in The Warm Heart of Africa would be to provide families vitamin A as a supplement that can be given twice a year, and educate the population during the distribution as to the importance and ways to obtain the vitamin themselves. This method has been done in other developing countries and the results are outstanding. It is time for the world to help the people of Malawi end their fight against malnutrition. The start of the battle is to gain more vitamin A. It is time for the Warm Heart of Africa to be given the opportunity to thrive.

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