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Smallholders are Hungry in Colombia

Introduction

Several factors in Colombia, including poverty, corruption and limited land supply, have caused numerous problems for smallholders. The country's aristocracy, while not globally powerful, created a system where many of the small rural farmers were pushed off their lands to become urbanites, while others remained to farm for those in power. According to "Rural poverty in Colombia," twenty-two million Colombians live in poverty, with 7.4 million facing extreme poverty. In the past few years, overall poverty in Colombia has been decreasing, but rural poverty rates, which are now 62 percent, have been on the rise. There are about 2.4 million poor rural Colombian families, comprised of over 10 million people. In urban areas, about 8 percent of the population is living below the national poverty level (Urban Poor). In Colombia, a country in the South American Tropical region, 47.7 percent of families with at least one unemployed parent live below the \$3 per day ratio, while up to 81.4 percent live on \$7 a day (Goldberg and Pavcnik).

According to Rural Poverty in Colombia, minorities, including Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples, are the country's poorest people. Women, children and people with little education are the most vulnerable to poverty because they have limited access and control of resources and land (Rural). In Colombia, if you are born in poverty, you stay in poverty. In cities like Cali, the third most populous in the nation, young children beg for money and food for their families. Ari Iaccarino, a Davenport native who has traveled to Colombia five times, said that he saw children accept juice from complete strangers in Cali.

Colombia as a country faces poverty in two different arenas. There are poor displaced farmers who were forced to leave their land and move to the cities, as well as poor farmers who work for small employers in rural areas. According to the "Cost of Living in Colombia," the Gross Domestic Product of \$8,900 is increasing at a rate of 3.5 percent per year, causing the income gap to grow between the rich and the poor. The steady increase is only helping about one percent of the population (Iaccarino). Many rural poor people are hungry and malnourished. The problem is not a lack of food, but rather poor distribution of food (Iaccarino). By contrast, urban poor people are eating more fatty, processed foods, rather than naturally grown foods.

Part of the problem is that even if the rural Colombians want to grow healthy foods, they are forced to eat bread and rice, the cheapest foods, because the government controls where farming can occur. Those in the cities are eating more processed food, because fruits and vegetables are too expensive. For example, a pineapple in Medellin, the second most populated city, costs \$4.95. A bag of rice for an entire family costs \$1.07. It is more economical for a family to spend the money on rice rather than fruits or vegetables. Additionally, people in the cities as well as poor farmers are unable to live where they want to live. Because of governmental policies forcing people out of specified lands, many farmers moved to urban areas, and other poor, hired farmers are unable to plant gardens and make healthy food for their families. Colombians could use a system of rotatable crops to add nutrients to the soil, as well as increase their iron and nutrition intake (Klett). According to Diversify your Diet, poor Colombians need to eat a richer variety of foods, including fruits and vegetables, to increase their overall health.

Struggles for Labor Unions

The poor need to be employed in a safe environment, but finding work and getting paid for it has proven difficult. Labor unions, the largest of which is Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria, or FENSUAGRO, the National Unified Agricultural Trade Union Federation, were established for that purpose. Another labor union, Bochica Farms, began in 2007 because farmers were experiencing poor treatment and low wages from their employers. Many other unions have formed for the same basic purpose: to give a voice to all of the small farmers in Colombia, as a large amount of the citizens work on small farms. Labor union members hope to earn better wages in order to buy healthier food for their families.

The farm labor unions in Colombia do not have the support of the government or large businesses. Blanquicet Farm Worker's Cooperative (COOTRAGROBLAN) was started by workers at La Esperanza farm to improve the lives of poor farmers in Colombia. One of the leaders of COOTRAGROBLAN, Oscar Maussa, has received numerous death threats over the years (“Struggle”). Many other union leaders receive threats, whether from employers, paramilitaries or other parties who for their own selfish reasons are opposed to successful small farmers.

Violence toward union leaders has grown more common over the past several years in Colombia. The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores, or the Central Union of Workers, founded in 1986, is a large trade union in Bogotá. In 2003, the president of CUT, Juan de Jesús Gómez was assassinated. Gómez was also involved in other labor unions, including the National Farm Industry Union SINTRAINAGRO and San Martín Municipality. He was killed on May 1, International Workers Day, while he was negotiating on behalf of small business. (“Urban”)

The American Center for International Labor Solidarity reports that 4,000 Colombian trade union members have been murdered in the past 20 years. Additionally, the number of trade unionist deaths per year in Columbia is greater than the number of trade union member deaths in all other countries combined. Members of trade unions face death threats by their “employers, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the state – because of weak or non-existent oversight – to stop dissent, silence workers and destroy the only mechanism that gives workers some control over their economic lives: their union” (Sweeney). The fear of violence and even death is preventing many small-business Colombians from fighting for their basic labor rights.

Obviously a way to fight poverty in Colombia, as in other countries, would be to find a way to get money into the hands of the poor, but it is not that easy. One problem is that the government is unwilling to prosecute the paramilitaries in these situations. If workers are threatened or intimidated, they are less likely to take a stand and join a labor or trade union. If fewer people are in the unions, then they will have less of an impact on the national scale, and therefore less economic justice. The pattern that follows is a continuous cycle that ultimately hurts the small farmers. With nobody in power fighting for them, they turn to the one group that they do have a say on but even that is a dangerous and risky choice. Workers on small farms will never be able to improve their working conditions and ways of life if they are unable to come together in a safe environment. The unions which exist to protect the workers in turn need to be protected by the government.

Governmental Actions Worsen the Problem Areas

A government initiative specified where farming can occur and which lands were declared as “off limits”. Because poor farmers did not have the ability or resources to move to new farms, many continued farming in the forbidden land. The government began to fumigate the cocoa hectares in 2007. Ever since then, it has been difficult for poor farmers to find places to make their homes, due to fear of the

herbicides. Consequently, subsistence farm families are unable to produce enough food to survive without worry of the herbicides in their vegetables (Damuzi).

According to Damuzi, another issue affecting the Colombian families living in poverty is a “poison rain” which is part of a US-backed program to fumigate the drug crops in South American countries. According to an article in Cannibus Culture Marijuana Magazine, “the fumigation campaign supposedly targets cocoa, poppy and marijuana crops, but is really intended as an act of war against rebel-governed southern Colombia and anyone else standing in the way of corporate development in that country.” The fumigation is actually killing Colombia’s rainforests, poisoning essential food crops, which results in causing birth defects and some types of cancers. In 2001, Barry McCaffrey’s \$1.6 billion drug war funding campaign was approved, causing the fumigation to be stronger than ever, and the Colombian farmers still have not recovered from their losses (Damuzi). This proves that foreign governments and policy are factors in the health of Colombian lands. Due to fear of the pesticides, poor rural families are unable to live and farm where they want to in Colombia.

Assistance from Local Government

As a result of the environment and poor nutrition, the poor people in Colombia are unhealthy because they have not been educated on the importance of healthy lifestyles. If the government could fund projects to teach citizens about nutrition and ways to grow different foods, then the small farmers would be able to produce healthier crops on a regular basis. One way to accomplish consistent healthy harvests is to grow rotating crops, such as including cereals and green vegetables, which help enrich the soil when completed on a yearly basis (Klett).

While government corruption does exist in Colombia, some local governments have implemented worthwhile programs which could be expanded. For example, in the city of Bogotá, on Sundays and holidays, city officials block off several lanes of traffic to open up the streets to people on bikes, skates and feet. This program, which offers over 70 miles of streets to people interested in improving their health, has started a worldwide movement to get people active and engaged (Baker). While this is great for people who live near the capital, similar programs are needed for poor farm families who are unable to travel to Bogotá. Most poor farmers are either uneducated regarding the damage caused by unhealthy eating or they do not have the resources to address this issue. For this reason, people in poverty stricken rural areas need both a quality education and available exercise programs. Local governments can provide invaluable assistance in both of these areas, as the Bogotá example demonstrates.

This type of policy would work well in all parts of the country. While it may be more difficult to plan such a large health campaign for smaller rural areas, it is by no means impossible. A simple organized day to teach about the importance of an active, healthy lifestyle would help. At this point, the Colombians need to realize the importance of making changes which are necessary to improve the overall health and well being of poor farmers.

Conclusion

Many of the factors that contribute to malnourishment in Colombia can be reversed to ensure a healthy lifestyle for the citizens. Because so many rural people are living in poverty, the government needs to face these issues on a national level.

In conclusion, the major recommendations would include improving both foreign and domestic policy, by:

1. Eradicating governmental corruption by creating laws and enforcing them. This includes establishing policies that forbid both the Colombian and foreign governments from spraying chemicals and herbicides on the crops.
2. Educating citizens not only about nutrition and healthy choices, but also about what crops can best impact their health, even at the garden level. This policy includes encouraging farmers to grow rotating crops which are high in iron and nutritional value, on a limited amount of land.
3. Prosecuting individuals who commit crimes against the labor unions. This policy would help to protect those who are fighting to protect other laborers by stopping vigilante violence, including death threats and assassinations against union members.
4. Implementing activities promoting a healthy lifestyle for rural citizens, similar to the weekly walking tradition in Bogotá.

Once these issues are addressed, Colombians will be able to work and produce healthy crops. If this happens, many factors that contribute to malnourishment in Colombia can be turned around to ensure a healthy lifestyle for the citizens. It will take major changes, but these steps would create a healthier Colombia in which the government works together with the rural farm families to improve the quality of life for the smallholder.

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