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Nigeria, Factor 15: Human Rights

Breaking Barriers Between People in Order to Help People

One of the many countries that struggle with providing food to all its citizens is Nigeria, a country bordering the Gulf of Guinea in western Africa. While only about twice the size of California, Nigeria is home to over 150 million people, making it the seventh-largest country in the world population-wise. With all these people living in Nigeria, and with a 2.8% growth rate, one thing Nigerians need most is food. Unfortunately, food seems to be in tragically short supply.

In Nigeria, a typical family can take two forms. One is the nuclear family, which is the most similar to traditional Western families: a man, his wife, and their children. The other is an extended family, which includes several nuclear families all grouped together. Having multiple children is considered fashionable in Nigerian culture, so most families will have around ten children. However, children will be fortunate just to survive past age two. The infant mortality rate in Nigeria is disturbingly high, with 74.6 babies dying per 1,000 births. To put that in perspective, in the U.S., 6.17 babies die per 1,000 (Nigeria, n.d.).

Education is a pressing issue in Nigeria. While the education in Nigeria is initially free, the education system is struggling to find room for the growing population. In 2013, 1.7 million people registered for tertiary admissions, but there was only room for 500,000 students (Education, 2013). Many people do not have the resources to travel to college, and just getting in is becoming more and more difficult. Spaces fill up before most of the possible students can manage to even register. This leaves people who were lucky enough to go to secondary schooling yet did not register in time to get a place in college without other options.

With a lack of beneficial and accessible health-care and an education system drowning in new students, resources for farming are stretched thin. An average farmer in Nigeria not only has his family's well-being to worry about, but also his livelihood. A large farm in Nigeria is around two hectares, with a smaller farm being less than one. That is a mere five acres at the maximum, as opposed to the United States' average farm size of 441 acres. On these farms, Nigerians can grow cocoa beans, cassava, cashews, rice, rubber, and more. However, most farmers in Nigeria are busy trying to feed themselves, and many of them simply don't have the room to grow extra for the market.

Typical farming techniques in Nigeria involve rotating crops and shifting cultivation, which is when a plot of land is temporarily cultivated and then left alone for a season while the farmer tends to another plot. While Nigeria has 83 million hectares of available farming land, which is over 205 million acres, only 74 million acres are in use. Sixty percent of Nigerians are farmers, but one-third of the Nigerian farmers are farming simply to feed themselves. The other two-thirds live on roughly two dollars or less a day (Articles, n.d.).

To be able to manage a better, more efficient farm, citizens of Nigeria need better roads to travel to town, so that their crops are not damaged before they've reached the market. Nigeria has a 120,546 mile network of roads that are generally described as "poor." The annual traffic mortality rate in 2009 was 5,000, a major contribution being the awful conditions of roads and the numerous unrepaired potholes. Drivers often swerve to miss the potholes and put themselves and others in danger. The funding for road repairs cannot keep up with the demand for road fixes. The potholes are worsened by flooding from May to October.

Nigerians also need better access to health care, so that their entire day is not occupied attempting to keep themselves and their family from dying. The health care system is overloaded and has dealt with mass outbreaks and several issues concerning chemical poisonings. Nigeria can only provide 3% of its people with health care.

They also need modern farming tools; currently farmers are stuck expending funds that they can barely scrape together to employ laborers, and are forced to use rudimentary tools (Feed, 2013). While Nigeria would be able to feed itself if it had the right funding, knowledge, and tools, it spend 11 billion dollars on importing food.

Farmers also need banks to be more willing to give them loans so that they can at least get a kick start. In Nigeria, the loan system is divided into two sections - formal and informal. Formal loans come from banks. While formal loans generally have lower interest rates, only 11% of commercial banks gave out formal loans in 2000. This is because many people do not meet the criteria for formal loans, or just cannot reach the banks, making informal loans the top choice. Informal loans usually come from credit associations, family, or friends. Credit associations, usually referred to as "adashi" or "esusu," are considered exploitive. They charge higher interest rates than many people can deal with. Since they are the last resort, however, the credit business continues to take advantage of farmers who need cash.

To top it all off, as if all these problems were not enough, there's the issue of human rights.

A major problem in Nigeria is the rift created by sexism in the farming industry and in the society in general. As opposed to women's 8%, men are 14% more likely to have any sort of paying job. When you add farming into the equation, women make up 70-80% of all working farmers, yet on the farms themselves, less than 13% of women had their opinions considered in any of the decisions of the farm (E. Gender, n.d.). Men are 38% more likely to own land than women. That means that while most of the farming work is being done by females, the decisions are in the hands of the men.

The majority of people going hungry in Nigeria are comprised of females and young children. Women farmers have even less access to essential tools. The jobs offered to them are lower-paying than the jobs offered to men, and even when they manage to snag a previously segregated job, their wages are dramatically lower - two to three dollars compared to a man's seven. Women have less access to training in jobs as well.

In school, during work, or even just out in public, women in Nigeria deal with sexual harassment. Their lives are filled with rape and discrimination in favor of their brothers. Multiple laws are gender biased. Widowers are treated harshly, and wives or daughters can even be disinherited because of their gender. Divorces are few and far between. When they do happen, property is almost always given to the man, and the woman is ostracized in society.

Women are also forced to deal with the mutilation of their genitals. This practice is done to ensure virginity or prevent sexual pleasure, and is done to 41% of women in Nigeria. Only one of the six major ethnic groups in Nigeria doesn't practice genital mutilation.

Another issue on the topic of human equality is the disparagingly low wages farmers are paid for selling their goods. Massive companies buy up valuable goods that farmers sell like cocoa, but pay the farmers not nearly enough. One company buys up cocoa at around two dollars per kilogram, then sells it at twenty-six dollars per kilogram (E. Gender, n.d.). Obviously companies could afford to pay farmers more, but it just is not happening.

Finally, the government itself is unfairly stacked towards certain religious factions than others. The concern in the leadership positions is that one ethnic and/or religious group will come to control the entire country. Because of this, more popular religious or ethnic groups oppress the smaller, less powerful ones, in a desperate attempt to keep their beliefs on top.

This unfair subjugation of specific groups of belief systems has a negative effect on the economy and the people. The suppression of these people has led the three government factions, east west, and north Nigeria, to split into regions where one idea is popular and regarded as correct. Certain regions have better socio-economic status, depending on who they agree with. Since these regions are richer than the rest, they can use their money and influence to control votes. These controlled votes can hurt the poorer people who need change that wealthier regions shoot down.

These human rights issues are nasty enough now, but what happens when the population grows? Nigeria is expected to soon have a larger population than the U.S. (Provost, 2013). How will the families in Nigeria feed themselves in the future if they are struggling now? The education system will not have room for all those people if they cannot fit in everyone today. Doctors, who are already stretched thin, will be run ragged. The infant mortality rate will continue to worsen. Poverty will become unbearable. Change needs to happen before it's too late.

Over the past four decades, organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which has instituted things like their Plan of Action for Women in Development and the Gender and Development Plan of Action, have at least tried to aid Nigeria by combating social inequalities. The World Bank has been helping out in Nigeria recently, giving rural families water and a higher income.

The FAO has also been following the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA). The ATA starts with teaching new practices that increase crop production. Seeds and better tools are provided and irrigation systems are implemented. The government is strengthened by an improved farming economy and is able to better provide for its people which in turn protects the farmers.

Their projects have begun to show results, with economic growth and community development beginning to grow. The UN has some ideas for helping out Nigeria as well. In addition to organizational actions, new tools have been invented that purify water in small but helpful amounts, or easy-to-assemble toilets that improve living conditions.

These projects and innovations have made a difference in many people's lives in terms of ability to pay for and grow food; however, overall the issues in Nigeria remained unchanged. Social inequalities are still running rampant. The child mortality rate, wage gap, and poverty level are still the same. Most families are struggling just as much as before.

Naturally, the issues prevalent in the Nigerian economy are issues that people should try to solve. The question arises: what more can be done to help people in Nigeria? What would be effective? Keeping them from starving, lowering the infant mortality rate, getting better doctors, obliterating inequality, and supplying farm equipment are all important aspects of aiding the farmers and urban citizens of Nigeria, but the costs for supplying Nigerians with these things is massive. Charity organizations and relief funds, coupled with donations, could have enough money to make a difference; however, a simple difference is not enough to be considered drastic change, and that's what Nigerians need right now. The only way to help everyone would be to team up with the Nigerians and work together, side by side, as well as instituting programs that help women and underpaid farmers everywhere reach financial security.

The people in Nigeria need to be included in the aid process. Explaining better farming techniques to the farmers there, not just giving them the tools, is critical in the success of helping out Nigeria. Suggesting ways to spend donated cash most effectively, working side by side with farmers for a week or two to help with harvests, and other actions that not only supply Nigerians with what they need, but demonstrate how to use what they get to gain more for themselves is key. When we work with the victims of sexism and poor wages, we need to make sure that they can fend for themselves. We should make sure that they have enough money and know-how to keep themselves from sinking.

In conclusion, the situation in Nigeria is dire. High infant mortality rates, lack of good roads, poor water quality and an elusive health care system all contribute to the hardships farmers face there. Inequality between humans is making it difficult to get work done effectively, and a lack of room in schools leaves many Nigerians without an education. To help Nigerians fix this, we need to supply them with what they desperately need. Farming equipment, money for food, and better roads are critical.

However, we can't just give these tools to people and expect them to know what to do with them. Working together to teach people both how and why these tools should be used is one of the most important steps in helping the people in Nigeria.

Helping women stand on the same level as men, and breaking down unfair wages for Nigerians is one of the most important steps. By breaking down gender barriers, the majority of the farming workforce will be able to make their own decisions. A woman will be able to work her farm without a man either overseeing her every step or taking advantage of her. The workforce will be able to sell their product and do their job while earning fair wages to support their farm and family. If everyone pools their resources and puts aside their differences, change might be just around the corner.

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