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Somalia, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Malnutrition in Somalia

The country of Somalia is plagued by a number of factors which cause food insecurity. One of the most severe factors currently affecting food security in Somalia is the continuing issues with malnutrition. This is due to the fact that Somalia is faced with chronic nutrition problems. These problems have a significant impact on the children living in Somalia. Around 16% of the total population under the age of five is acutely malnourished, with another 4% severely malnourished, meaning nearly 241,000 children are acutely malnourished and another 57,000 are severely malnourished. Somalia's malnutrition rate in children under 5 rose to the highest in the world recently during the 2011-2012 famine. These statistics are heartbreaking to say the least and should be addressed with more urgency.

Somalia is a country on the horn of Africa with a land area of approximately 246,200 square miles, similar in size to Texas. The highest point in the country is the Shimber Berris at 7900 feet (*Countries and Their Cultures*). This point is a part of the Karkaar Mountains, which are found along the northwestern border with Ethiopia and runs all the way to the horn of Africa. Somalia has a coastline of 1800 miles. The country is hot and experiences two wet and two dry seasons a year. Little vegetation grows in Somalia, except for between the Jubba and Shabelle Rivers in south central Somalia. Mogadishu is Somalia's capital city.

About 75% of the population lives in rural areas and the remaining 25% live in urban areas. The people living in rural areas are either nomadic herders or farmers. Nomadic herders live in dome-shaped, collapsible shelters called aqals. Aqals are made of poles covered by hides, woven fiber mats, or sometimes cloth or tin. Only essential furniture is in the aqal. Some farmers live in a more permanent style of aqal, called a mundal. Mundals are made from poles and brush that have been stuck together with mud, animal dung, and ashes and are covered with cone-shaped thatched roofs (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Another type of home that farmers live in is called an arish, which has a flat tin roof (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Farmers have few items in their homes. Cooking is often done outdoors or in a communal cooking hut because their homes are only large enough for sleeping. Somalis who live in urban areas typically live in Arab-style houses made of stone or brick, which is covered with plaster or cement. These houses are one to two stories and have a flat roof with bars covering the lower windows. Many urban Somalis have no access to electricity or running water in their homes. These conditions contrast greatly with those of the wealthy Somalis, who live in western style-homes with tile roofs.

Food comes from a variety of sources in Somalia, ranging from crops grown by farmers all the way to aid provided by foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations. Corn, beans, sorghum, millet, squash, and other fruits and vegetables are grown and eaten by farmers in southern Somalia. Milk is a major source of food for Somali herdsman and nomads. Nomads consider camel hump a delicacy and eat it at celebrations. Other popular types of meat are sheep and goats. Despite its popularity, meat is only served a few times a month (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Some food staples for nomads are durra (a grain), honey, dates, rice, and tea. Boiled rice and millet is a popular food, even though rice must be imported from other countries. The most commonly eaten bread is muufo, which is made from ground corn flour. Somalis generally dislike fish even though their coastline is abundant with it. Somalis are Sunni Muslims and, therefore, do not eat pork or drink alcohol. Their favorite drinks are milk, tea, coffee, and water. Popular food in restaurants is Italian and Arab cuisine (*Countries and Their Cultures*). It is customary for men to eat first and for the women and children to eat once they are finished. Somalis typically eat their food with the first three fingers on their right hand or with silverware.

Two main types of farming exist in Somalia. One method was introduced by European settlers while the other is indigenous to the region. Somalis traditionally farm using rain-fed, dry-land techniques or use irrigation to provide water from the country's two rivers, the Shabeelle and Jubba (*Encyclopedia of the Nations*). More modern European-style techniques like sprinklers are used by Somali and Italian banana farmers (*Encyclopedia of the Nations*). Farms grow a variety of crops in Somalia, including corn, beans, sorghum, millet, squash, and a few other vegetables and fruits. Some essential cash crops are bananas, coffee, cotton, peanuts, citrus fruits, and sugarcane. Banana is the leading cash crop in the country. In farming clans, women and girls are in charge of planting and harvesting crops, caring for children, and cooking. Men and older boys tend to the most valuable animals, cattle and camels, in the Samaal clan. At the same time, girls and young boys watch over the sheep and goats (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Women in nomadic clans take care of children, cook and look after the aqal.

The typical family includes a man, his wife or wives, and their children. In some cases, unmarried or elderly relatives may also live with the family. If a man has more than one wife, he divides his time between them (*Countries and Their Cultures*). His wives usually live in their own houses with their children. If a divorce occurs, the children stay with their mother. The household is usually led by the man unless a woman is divorced and widowed.

In Somalia, education is provided by a number of sources. These sources include Community Education Committees, regional administrations, religious groups, educational umbrella groups and networks, and Non-Governmental Organizations. Foreign governments have slowly increased the delivery of education to those in need. In Somalia, only 710,860 primary school age children attend school out of 1.7 million; therefore, roughly only 42% of children attend school (*UNICEF Children's Rights & Emergency Relief Organization*). A majority of teachers are unqualified, leading to a high drop-out rate along with low examination pass rates. On average, 62% of children drop out of school by the fifth grade (*UNICEF Children's Rights & Emergency Relief Organization*). In primary schools only 36% of enrolled students are girls. That number drops to 28% for secondary schools.

Life for women in Somalia has become tougher since the collapse of the government in 1991 (*Somali Women*.) With the collapse of the government, the new government that followed removed the "legal protection of human rights of women" (*Somali Women*). Things have been improving more recently due to the establishment of a federal government in 2012 (Samira). Still, Somali women have very low status compared to that of men (*Rural Poverty Portal*). They have a small role in politics, with only 14% of the country's parliament being composed of women (Samira). Many Somali women cannot read and are poorly educated. This lack of education is due to the fact that "approximately 60% of girls drop out of school by the end of primary school" (*Somali Women*). As a result of this, women are then taught more traditional ideas, such as staying at home, and are instructed to be subservient to men. Due to war, however, many women have had to provide for their families and have struggled doing so (*Lives in Conflict, Somali Women and Children*). Women in Somalia also suffer sexual injustice. Like many African countries, young girls are forced to undergo female genital mutilation (*Lives in Conflict, Somali Women and Children*). In Internally Displaced Persons camps (IDP) many women live in fear of sexual assault and rape (*Human Rights Watch*). Most of these crimes are never reported due to Somalis being unaware of the medical and judicial services available to them. They also go unreported due to a lack of confidence in the government to do anything about it (*Human Rights Watch*). Like a lot of Somalis, they lack adequate access to healthcare. As a result, about 45 women die daily due to complications during childbirth and pregnancy (*Rural Poverty Portal*).

Somalia's main export is livestock (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Camels are commonly sold to Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia. Another major export is animal hides. Somalia's chief crop export is bananas. Other important crops are coffee, cotton, peanuts, mangoes, citrus fruits, and sugarcane. Fishing,

along with the export of frankincense and myrrh, is also a part of the economy. A majority of Somalis are self-employed as farmers, herders, or independent business owners.

Somalia's Gross Domestic Product was estimated to be near 5.95 billion U.S. dollars as of 2015 (*Trading Economics*). This data means that the yearly income is, on average, 187 U.S. dollars (*Trading Economics*). Somalia is not an industrialized nation, with manufacturing only contributing 5% of the Gross Domestic Product (*Central Bank of Somalia*). Somalia's industry consists of fish and meat canneries, milk processing plants, sugar refineries, leather tanning factories, and pharmaceutical and electronics factories. Many of the factories in Somalia were made thanks to the assistance of other countries. The country's few natural resources have also been underutilized. Instead of relying on industry, Somalia relies on agriculture to fuel its economy. Livestock plays a huge role in the economy, with 60% of the country depending on it for food and income. Livestock also provides 64% of the Gross Domestic Product for Somalia (*Central Bank of Somalia*). The economy is set on shaky ground, though, with agriculture at the mercy of the climate. Somalia regularly experiences periodic droughts and flooding. This pattern was extremely relevant in 2006, when floods destroyed food stores and water supplies and again with the declaration of famine in south Somalia (*Rural Poverty Portal*).

Due to the collapse of the central government and widespread destruction from the civil war, Somalia's health care system is in terribly bad shape. There is a lack of doctors in the country's few hospitals, so as a result, a number of unqualified people practice medicine in private facilities (*Countries and Their Cultures*). This absence of regulation also is prevalent with prescription drugs, which are often improperly dispensed by pharmacies (*Countries and Their Cultures*). The leading causes of illness and death are malaria and tuberculosis. Many easily-treated conditions, such as tetanus and leprosy, claim lives unnecessarily (*Countries and Their Cultures*). Poor sanitary conditions cause gastro-intestinal diseases such as cholera to run rampant. These poor conditions mean a majority of health care must be provided by international and Somali nongovernmental organizations like the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Somalia has a very high poverty rate, with 73% of its population living below the poverty line (*UNDP – United Nations Development Programme*). Around 43% of the country lives on less than \$1 per day in a situation known as extreme poverty (*Rural Poverty Portal*). In rural areas, this figure rises to a disheartening 53% (*Rural Poverty Portal*). A large number of Somalis experience extreme poverty and are unable to meet food requirements. Out of a population of 10.5 million, 857,000 require "urgent and lifesaving assistance" while "an additional 2 million people are on the margin of food insecurity and require continued livelihoods support" (*UNDP – United Nations Development Programme*). Only one out of every three Somalis has access to safe water (*UNDP – United Nations Development Programme*). Strong clans have pushed weaker clans out of valuable agricultural land, resulting in over 1 million people being displaced (*UNDP – United Nations Development Programme*). These people then had to relocate to urban areas.

The U.N. declared on July 20, 2011, that an ongoing famine existed in Somalia that affected 3.1 million people. Of the 3.1 million people affected, an estimated half-million were malnourished children (Maxwell). Several factors, such as low rainfall, the increasing price of food, and the recent fighting, caused this recent famine. Somalia had experienced the lowest levels of rainfall in 50 years. This lack of rainfall caused an increase in livestock mortality, and, at the same time, reduced crop production. The death of livestock and reduced crop production affected local food availability and sales, a major source of income to those in rural areas. Another major factor for the famine was the steadily increasing prices of food. The increasing price of food was significant because Somalia has always relied heavily on imported food (Maxwell). Fighting between the Transitional Federal government and the terrorist group Al Shabaab also was a key factor in the famine. Food distribution in response to the famine was made more

difficult due to Al Shabaab limiting access to those affected by the famine (Maxwell). As a result, the humanitarian community was left searching for a new way to provide food needs in affected areas.

Different parts of Somalia experience different levels of stability. Somaliland, a region in the northwest, and Puntland, a region in the northeast, are both more stable than the south. The southern part of the country has experienced conflict for 15 years (*Central Bank of Somalia*). People in the south are in a much worse situation regarding poverty, food security, infrastructure, and services.

The Somali government is one of the most corrupt governments in the world, tying with the countries of North Korea and Afghanistan. A World Bank report in May 2012 said \$131 million was unaccounted for in Transitional Federal Government (TFG) revenues in 2009-2010 (*Hiiraan Online :: News and Information about Somalia*). These missing millions account for a total of 68% of all recorded revenues. Many TFG officials use public finances as private finances. As much as 80% of withdrawals from Somalia's central bank are used for private purposes instead of government programs (Vogt). Many TFG officials completely disregard financial rules. Between 2010 and 2013, Finance Ministry cashier Shir Axmed Jumcaale withdrew \$20.5 million in his name to make untracked payments for ministry officials (Vogt). This corruption does nothing for the country, except harm those living in poverty in urban and rural Somalia. A new United Nations report claims "as much as half of the food aid sent to Somalia is diverted from needy people to a web of corrupt contractors, radical Islamic militants, and local United Nations staff members" (Gettleman). The report suggests that the World Food Program rebuild its food distribution system from the ground up. This food distribution system supplied 485 million dollars' worth of aid to at least 2.5 million people in 2009 (Gettleman). The report claims that some humanitarian resources have been diverted to military use. The report also states that "a handful of Somali contractors for aid agencies have formed a cartel and have become important power brokers-some of whom channel their profits, or the aid itself, directly to armed opposition groups" (Gettleman). This report then takes aim at influential businessman Abdulkadir M. Nur. The report alleges that Nur uses his connections to coordinate the hijacking of his own trucks and then goes on to sell the aid for profit. By using different food contractors, relief organizations could avoid this problem.

Even though the world produces enough food for the entire global population, one person in eight still goes to bed hungry each night (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). A number of factors contribute to hunger in developing countries such as Somalia. People are often caught in a poverty trap. In a poverty trap, the poor are hungry and their hunger keeps them in poverty (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). In the world one out of every four children has their growth stunted. This prevents them from developing fully and can deeply affect them as adults. "Adults who were malnourished as children earn at least 20% less on average than those who weren't" (*Fast Facts About Malnutrition - Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition*)." Those who live in poverty can't afford healthy foods for their families, which cause them to not get necessary nutrients. They then are weaker and less able to work for money that could help them escape poverty. Many children have their growth stunted due to malnourishment (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). As a result of having their growth stunted, their future income can be affected and can force them to live a life of poverty and hunger.

Due to their overwhelming poverty, many farmers lack the money to buy seeds (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). They, then, are unable to plant crops that would provide for their families. Many farmers don't have access to the tools and fertilizers needed to make crop cultivating easier.

Somalia, like many developing countries, also lacks key agricultural infrastructure such as roads, warehouses, and irrigation systems (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger*

Worldwide). This lack of infrastructure results in high costs for transportation, lack of storage facilities, and unreliable water supplies. All of these limit food access and agricultural yields.

Natural disasters have also increased in frequency and severity around the world. This dramatic increase in severe natural disasters has had a huge effect on those living in developing countries. Drought is one of the leading causes of food shortages around the world (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). In 2011, drought caused crop failures, as well as livestock losses, in many parts of Somalia. Like other developing countries, Somalia's farmland is under threat constantly due to natural conditions (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*).

Somalia is also no stranger to war, having constantly experienced it since the start of their civil war in the early 1990s. Fighting displaces many Somalis from their homes. These people often make their way into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps where they have to find new ways to provide for their families. As a result of this, there are many disruptions in farming, food production, and transport of said food. Shifting frontlines play a role, as they affect different communities and result in restricted food access from rural areas to urban centers (*ICRC*). The ongoing conflict in Somalia has contributed greatly to the level of food insecurity there and will threaten it until its end.

Also, in recent years, food prices have been very unstable. These changing food prices make it hard for the poor to have access to nutritious foods consistently (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). Spikes in food prices can put food out of the financial reach of many. These spikes in price severely affect children by stunting their growth and leaving a lasting impact on their lives (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*).

Many things can be done to help solve Somalia's food insecurity. Due to ongoing conflict and the displacement of farmers, foreign aid is needed to play a large role in this prominent issue. Increasing the cooperation between aid groups will help eliminate food insecurity problems in Somalia. When groups work together, production increases immensely. Aid groups working together can develop and exchange expertise and knowledge. They are also able to face more criticism to see what they could improve on (*Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*). Two programs that would benefit from increased cooperation are the Mother and Child Health and Nutrition Program and the United Nations Humanitarian Air Support.

The Mother and Child Health and Nutrition Program (MCHN) is dedicated to preventing chronic and acute malnutrition in children under the age of 2 (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). The program focuses on the first 1,000 days of life, starting at conception. Focusing on the first 1,000 days of life is very crucial because proper nutrition can prevent irreversible damages to a child's growth and mental development. To ensure a good start in the life of children, pregnant and nursing women are also targeted by the program. Those who participate in the program receive daily supplements of food to supplement their generally poor traditional diet. The program is implemented through medical clinics in Somalia. By providing the program through medical clinics, health workers ensure children keep growing at a healthy rate by treating their illnesses and immunizing them when they come to get their food (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). Women can stay in the program until delivery or until their child turns 6 months old. Their children can stay in the program until they are two years old.

Similarly, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Support (UNHAS) is one of two special operations currently being implemented by the World Food Program (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*). Its main goal is to support the provision of emergency food supplies to areas inaccessible by road. The UNHAS provides life-saving humanitarian aid such as medical supplies and helps transport aid workers within Somalia safely. In 2012, the UNHAS transported 24,000 people

and 200 metric tons of cargo using their eight different aircraft (*WFP United Nations World Food Program – Fighting Hunger Worldwide*).

Foreign aid is absolutely necessary in Somalia. By using the UNHAS to transport aid workers for the MCHN, we would be able to educate remote villages about nutrition but also to provide supplemental nutrition to them. We could also immunize these villagers to reduce the number of lives claimed unnecessarily from disease. This aid is absolutely necessary to these people because 53% of rural Somalis live in extreme poverty (*Rural Poverty Portal*). They are also, often unable to meet nutrition requirements for healthy growth.

By partnering the Mother and Child Health and Nutrition Program (MCHN) and the United Nations Humanitarian Air Support (UNHAS), one can make a lasting impact on Somalia's youth. Together, these programs can break this vicious cycle where Somalis are trapped in poverty due to their nutritional issues. Currently, Somali youth often are unable to reach their full potential due to malnutrition. With the help of the MCHN and the UNHAS, they can finally free themselves of the chains of poverty. Eliminating poverty will be no easy task with the number of barriers that could disrupt progress, but with enough effort, they can accomplish this task. With the increased efforts of the MCHN and the UNHAS, the children of Somalia have a better chance to go on and live prosperous lives.

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