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Malawi Education: The Simple and Impactful Power of Knowledge

The United States of America is an extremely privileged country compared to a majority of others. The U.S. has access to nearly unlimited resources (“Consumption by the United”), including a great education system (Desilver) and constantly improving agricultural (“U.S. Agriculture”) and medicinal (Williams et al.) technologies. Additionally, the average family in America can easily go to a local market or grocery store to purchase food for everyday uses (“Number of Supermarkets”). Other countries, however, are not as privileged. One example is the small landlocked country of Malawi. Located in Eastern Africa, Malawi has a population of approximately 19,018,000 people, which continues to grow at a rate of 2.91 percent annually (“Malawi Population”). As of 2016, 83.55 percent of the entire population lived in rural areas, where only 4.7 percent have access to electricity (“Malawi - Rural Population”). Currently, of all the people in rural communities, eleven million individuals practice small subsistence farming, accounting for the 5.3 million hectares of arable land. Of all the land in Malawi, only one third of it is arable, due to mountains, rough pastures, and forests (Manda, Levi Zeleza...). Most of the families only grow enough crops and raise enough livestock to feed themselves, leaving no extra room for profit from local markets (Dolph). Still, a bigger picture exists alongside this snapshot of an average person in Malawi.

For the farmers who do grow cash crops to sell at local marketplaces or eventually export to other countries, some of the most common crops are tobacco (“Major Problems...”), tea, sugar, cotton, and coffee (Dolph), with tobacco being the largest cash crop among rural cultivators (“Major Problems”). Agriculture accounts for more than thirty-three percent of the country’s total GDP, and ninety percent of all exports. Also, small farmers are responsible for contributing three-fourths of all food consumed within Malawi. Astonishingly, each average farmer only has less than one hectare, about 2.5 acres, of land to farm, and with decreasing soil fertility and lack of credit or extension services, production is extremely low (Manda, Levi Zeleza...). Some of the difficulties associated with subsistence farming can be due to the harsh climates.

The climate of Malawi differs greatly depending on the season, but it is overall a subtropical, fairly dry climate, with three main seasons. The warm-wet season lasts from November through April, which counts for ninety-five percent of all annual precipitation - this season is also responsible for a significant amount of flooding in the low-lying areas. The warm-wet season is frustrating for all farmers - it is the time when they receive almost all of the precipitation for their farms, yet it could be the reason the crops suffer that year, too. Too much rain too quickly can result in a flood, but too little rain causes the crops to die, also. The next season is the cool-dry season, lasting from May to August, during which the lowest average temperature is around sixty-three degrees Fahrenheit, but this season can cause frost in some areas during June and July. Yet another challenging time - although it is not when most of the farming is done, subsistence farmers still have to attempt to grow something, because the country also suffers from lack of food storage (“Improving Food Security...”), and poverty prevents many families from purchasing foodstuffs from local markets. One family may have a bountiful crop in the warm-wet season and then be starving again in a few months because their stored food has all rotted. Finally, the last season: a hot-dry season occurs during September and October, where the average highest temperature hovers around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit (“Climate of Malawi”). This season must be the hardest to deal with - it is the cruelest season of all. However, the climate is not the only thing working against farmers. The geography of Malawi is quite diverse: a good portion of the country is actually a lake - Lake Malawi, which is the twelfth-largest freshwater lake in the entire world, responsible for fish being one of the easiest-found sources of meat in the country. The rest of the country is mostly plateaus, but to the north are largely

rugged highlands, while the southern section is a part of the East African Great Rift Valley (“Geography”), an enormous valley riddled with innumerable rifts due to the splitting tectonic plates beneath the surface (Wood, James...). Still, the problems do not end there.

A typical family size in the rural area is two parents with five to six children (Dolph), but many of the children die before the age of five (“Malawi”). However, extended family members normally live with the main family, either in the same house or within adjoined houses (Dolph). More than sixty-five percent of the population lives in traditional dwellings, which are structures with mud walls and thatched roofs, which offer extremely poor protection from the elements. Only sixteen percent of people live in houses considered “permanent”, with concrete, burnt brick, or stone walls and iron sheet, concrete, or asbestos (typically seen in the form of tiles or corrugated sheets (A Guide...)) roofs. Most dwellings have two or three rooms and house four to five people on average (“Malawi - Housing”). Low numbers, even with extended family members, can be blamed on the facts that most children die at a young age and the life expectancy is terribly low. A typical family diet includes chicken, goat, or the occasional pig is added to the most common food of “nsima”, which is boiled cornmeal, usually eaten twice a day. A variety of different fruits is sold at local markets and is a common side dish, and vegetables are also available but not very popular. According to one source, “Malawi relies heavily on foodstuffs supplied by Western nations” (Dolph). Currently, Mary’s Meals, a nonprofit hunger-fighting international organization, provides thirty percent of all primary school meals to children in school. Since 2002, they’ve fed 928,551 children throughout the school year (“Mary’s Meals: Malawi”). It is becoming clear that although hunger is still a problem, it is shrinking at a steady rate due to the number of farmers, access to markets for those with money, and help from charitable organizations (“Malawi: Child and Adolescent Health”). However, the education of Malawi is still terribly inadequate.

The total literacy rate of people over the age of fifteen is 62.7 percent, which, surprisingly, is better than the average African country literacy rate, but the female literacy rate is at a shocking 49.8 percent, which is much lower than the average (“Major Problems...”). Most children are only educated when their parents can afford to pay for school fees and uniforms. Additionally, even on the rare occasion that kids are sent to school, nearly every individual drops out before high school due to the need to tend crops and/or care for younger siblings. Also, an education higher than secondary school is practically unheard of. Only a few colleges exist in the entire country, and when families can afford it, they typically choose to send their children to colleges in different countries: countries with better reputations for education. This problem of education affects both genders and all ages, but is usually worse for women, due to discrimination (Lake) and exploitation (“Economic Empowerment”). According to “Education and Gender Equality”, “...women account for two thirds of the 750 million adults without basic literacy skills”, and sixteen million females will never step into a classroom of any kind. Additionally, health care in Malawi is extremely poor.

While several hospitals and a few schools of nursing are scattered throughout the country, health care is really only available to urban-living populations with enough money. In rural areas, a medicine man or woman is usually present, using roots, potions, and herbs to make medicine. Because of the lack of knowledge on illnesses, preventions, and cures, Malawi has one of the highest AIDS cases in the entire world, and yellow fever and malaria are responsible for an extremely high mortality rate (Dolph). The life expectancy of a typical man in Malawi today is only forty-eight years, while the women’s is fifty-one. Although life expectancy has gone up in recent years, it is still terribly low and going up at a very slow rate. Infant and children-under-five deaths are a big problem: recent data shows the infant mortality rate is around sixty-six per one thousand live births, and the under-five mortality rate is about 112 per one thousand live births. According to a website about Malawi’s children’s health, “A total of forty-seven percent of children aged under five years are stunted, four percent are wasted and thirteen percent are underweight” (“Malawi: Child...”). And when it comes to obtaining food, almost every family has their own garden and plot of farmland, even in urban areas, both to grow food for themselves and to sell in

order to buy more necessities (Dolph). Although all of these problems are slowly becoming smaller and of less severity, the statistics are far from those of a developed country - Malawi needs help ("Malawi: Child"). Yet, still more barriers are present for a typical family.

Major barriers facing a typical family, especially in rural areas, are preventable diseases, lack of education, difficulty traveling to and from school, and lack of new agricultural technologies. Currently, most of the causes of infant death are: "pneumonia (twenty-three percent), underweight (twenty-two percent), diarrheal diseases (eighteen percent) and malaria (fourteen percent). After the first year of life, infections from the communicable childhood diseases of tetanus, whooping cough, diphtheria, poliomyelitis and measles are the major cause of death in children" ("Malawi"). Unfortunately, these are not the only diseases, or even the worst ones. As mentioned before, Malawi has one of the worst cases worldwide of AIDS and HIV. When it comes to education, most children never complete high school, let alone attempt to go to college (Dolph). One other likely reason for these children dropping out is the distance one child must go to simply get to school every day. One typical example is walking twelve kilometers, or 7.5 miles, every day each way to school (Lake). And, due to the large numbers of kids and adolescents who do not attend school, another problem has arisen: lack of new agricultural technologies and practices. When the farmers' children stop going to school in order to help with chores at home, they are actually making the situation at home worse. When they fail to go to school or use their education, they fail to improve their current living situation, meaning everyone is caught in a vicious cycle of endless decay; the fields used for agricultural purposes are yielding less and less crop due to decreasing soil fertility, leaving many people in a poverty from which they will never escape unless action is taken (Hickman).

All of the major barriers facing a typical family and additional issues the country faces can be greatly impacted and lessened by valuable *knowledge*, which is taught and learned through a better education system. All of the diseases that are adding to the mortality rate are bound to occur no matter what preventive action is taken against them, but the number of cases would drop significantly if more education were to be provided on the diseases, their prevention practices, medicinal cures, and also on good hygiene. The average medicine man or woman is not equipped with the newest practices or information to fight even simple illnesses. With the right education, these preventable diseases can be stopped. Another one of the main reasons adolescents do not finish or attempt secondary school is due to the duties at home (Dolph). If teaching programs were personalized for the individual area, such as more agricultural classes for farmers' children and more health classes for thirteen- to fourteen-year-old kids, many more children would stay in school because it would be in their best interest and improve their future, as well as their family's standard of living. However, those aren't the only problems with school - another big contributing factor is the distance it takes to walk to school.

Some children walk more than twelve kilometers (7.5 miles) to school every day, and then the same distance back (Lake). If some charitable organizations would start implementing a small school in every town, whether it was mostly outdoors or in a building with multiple uses, it would save children the walk to school, meaning they'd have more time to do chores, more daylight to do homework by, more energy to get everything done, and could even possibly bring younger siblings to school so they would not have to drop out in order to care for them. One example of a charitable non-governmental organization improving education is with the World Bank and Bangladesh. In December 2017, the World Bank officially approved a 510 million dollar plan to improve secondary education for children, especially girls and the poor, in the country of Bangladesh. The plan is called Transforming Secondary Education for Results, or TSER, and it will help thirteen million students from sixth to twelfth grade. The TSER also implements ways to attract, recruit, and train new teachers ("World Bank"). This kind of plan to help secondary education could be implemented into Malawi with great results. With Mary's Meals providing thirty percent of all primary school meals, the children's main need is no longer malnutrition ("Malawi") -

it is the education to produce better results in their personal farms, prevent and treat diseases, and gain the knowledge to get better jobs and earn better living wages.

Through improved education, all the populations of Malawi would benefit - competition would raise in markets, as well as supply, meaning sellers could make more profit and buyers could have more options. And, when the children share their newfound knowledge with their parents, all of the agricultural industry could advance and improve. Additionally, if problems arise for money needed for schools, non-governmental organizations, such as the World Bank, could help tremendously. These organizations could begin to focus on giving more education to all ages; experienced doctors and nurses from around the world could offer training in existing hospitals and to rural medicine men and women, in order to improve sanitation and prevent infection-related illnesses, as well as basic medicinal practices. Within rural areas, the teachers may need to be aware of religious beliefs when demonstrating new solutions, as many villages believe illness is caused by demons (Dolph). Yet another benefit of better education is that the wealthy, intelligent people seeking higher education would not leave the country, or could come back to teach their skills and improve their home for future generations. However, there would need to be some type of charitable donation to assist in funding these programs.

One example of an organization women's education and fighting discrimination against women is the group called UN Women. The goals of UN Women are higher wages, better security, and more access and control over resources for all females. This organization supports feminine empowerment in the field of economics, which will lead to gender equality, lessened poverty, and economic growth. UN Women carries out its tasks through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the International Labour Organization - both are conventions on the importance and benefits of gender equality. According to new studies, more and more evidence is mounting of that proves if women are treated as equals, economies are bettered and there is "sustainable development" ("Economic Empowerment"). Another organization exists with the goals of allowing all people; boys, girls, men, and women, to have the same opportunities for full educations. This group is called the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO. UNESCO is achieving its goals through its new plan named Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education 2030 Framework for Action. SDG 4 will allow for equal education and learning opportunities to all ages, and SDG 5 plans to implement gender equality ("Education and Gender Equality"). Still, there are more solutions to fighting for equal and better education.

One new idea is that non-governmental organizations, such as the World Bank, the Malawi government, or certain schools with additional budgets could offer partial or full ride scholarships, through high schools and/or colleges within Malawi or in other countries. With the scholarship, though, the student would have to agree to stay in Malawi or return to Malawi and teach his or her skills for a certain number of years. This could save money and help boost the number of teachers, allowing for schools to become more common even in rural areas. This plan could also become a popular goal for the future among pupils, especially for students who have never planned on a higher education or even leaving Malawi. All of these solutions could very effectively lower the mortality rate and infectious diseases, and increase the level of average education and lead to more advanced agricultural and medicinal technologies and practices.

In Malawi, families living in rural areas suffer terribly from a lack of good quality education, which leads to life-threatening diseases, less production from all farms, and living conditions that fail to improve. Through developing local schools, incorporating more personalized education programs for students, such as agricultural classes for future farmers, and allowing non-governmental organizations to aid in the funding of these new schools and better education systems, the people of Malawi can more effectively help themselves; they can grow and harvest more crops, earn a higher income, prevent life-threatening illnesses, and decrease mortality rates. Helping Malawi to provide better knowledge to its population is

not that difficult of a task, but it is a necessary action to take in order for Malawi to become a better country and for the world overall to advance. A good, common moral of all just people should be to help the less-fortunate, such as the uneducated in Malawi, to develop better lives for themselves - similar to those lives taken for granted in the privileged and blessed United States of America.

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