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Uganda, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Uganda: Supporting the Farmers is the First Step Towards Better Nutrition

Uganda is a country that is currently recovering from many years of economic insecurity, and so far, noble efforts have been made to help the country become more developed. Despite Uganda progressing in many areas that they were previously struggling in, malnutrition seems to be the one thing that they can't be rid of. In Uganda, it is not uncommon for a family to experience malnutrition, especially in the rural areas of the country. According to the UNICEF Uganda Nutrition Action Plan there are 2.3 million children suffering from malnutrition (UNICEF). This statistic is alarming, and demonstrates Uganda's need for a more efficient way to farm and feed themselves. Many people are aware of the food problems in Africa, but perhaps they do not know what is occurring to its full extent. In order to help solve the malnutrition epidemic within Uganda, it is necessary to identify and analyze the typical farm family, dive deeper into the issue of malnutrition and its roots within Uganda, and discuss some possible solutions to the sickness and hunger plaguing the land.

The first step in truly understanding the problems with malnutrition in Uganda is to take a look at who exactly are being affected by this issue. The typical smallholder farm in Uganda usually consists of a mother, a father, and on average 5-6 children. Taking into account the high malnutrition numbers, it does not seem feasible for any family to support and feed 7 or 8 people while merely using subsistence farming to get by. There needs to be a more stable and reliable source of food for the small farmers to have easy access to. The crops that the Ugandan families are growing and eating include plantains, cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, maize, millet, bananas, potatoes and groundnuts/peanuts (Our Africa). Many of these popular crops are starch, and would not give the families all of the proteins and other nutrients that they need to live a healthy life. In addition to this, finding a good education in Uganda is very hard. Schooling is free, but many children are still forced to drop out due to the fact that they cannot afford the supplies needed to participate. This lack of educated citizens means that an even larger population of farmers will form, due to limited job options. Even if a child is able to afford to continue their education, the quality of the education in Uganda is not good, especially in the rural areas. Education being worse in the rural areas makes it even harder for the rural farm children to find the means to escape the inadequate lifestyle of a subsistence farmer. On top of all of this, malaria and HIV/AIDS run rampant through the country, and there are very limited options for health care because many doctors do not stay in Uganda due to the low wages. Taking into account all of these factors, it is clear that the quality of life in rural Uganda is not up to par with some countries that are developed further.

To delve deeper into the background of the average smallholder farmer in Uganda and what they are working with, the size of a normal farm is three hectares (FAO). To put this in context, the average sized farm in America is around 175 hectares (Agriculture 101). The majority of exports from Uganda comes from coffee, but some other commonly exported crops include tobacco, sugar, tea, and cacao (Our Africa). Many of these crops require intensive human labor in order to harvest them, which may contribute to the malnutrition problem, considering the workers are doing strenuous work with hardly any food in their system to provide them energy. Uganda is sometimes referred to as the "breadbasket of East Africa", however Uganda produces way more food than its people actually consumes (Uganda). The people of Uganda also tend to rely on many traditional farming techniques, which may hinder their ability to maximize their crop yields and agricultural productivity. It is important to teach Ugandans some updated farming techniques, as most smallholder farmers in Uganda will grow their own food as opposed to buying food anywhere (Uganda). As for who is making their living off of these farms, two-fifths of the Ugandan population is involved in the agriculture business. Collectively, all of these farms take up 5.2

million hectares of land. This is about a fifth of the entire land mass of Uganda, meaning that a pretty sizeable amount of land is being dedicated to growing crops.

Next it is important to discuss and understand some of the barriers that Uganda is facing and why they have not become more successful in fending off hunger and malnutrition. Uganda does not necessarily need to increase their agricultural productivity, in fact, Uganda is one of the most successful farming areas in East Africa. The problem with agriculture in Uganda is that people are not eating all of the food they are producing, and when they are getting to eat some of their crops, there is no nutritional balance in their meals. Earning a living can also be very challenging for the Ugandan population. Many farmers are forced to farm simply for subsistence, and the young men who do try to pursue a higher education will go on to face unemployment even in the urban areas of Uganda. Gaining adequate nutrition is the biggest barrier for Ugandans. Studies have shown that even children in wealthy households are experiencing malnutrition, suggesting further problems beyond people living in poverty being unable to provide for their families (Musiimenta & Bachou). There must be a bigger underlying issue with the composition of the typical Ugandan diet or food availability.

After going into the details of rural Ugandan life and some of the problems that they are experiencing, it is obvious that the big issue in Uganda is malnutrition. Malnutrition is mostly prevalent in adolescents, with more than 2 million children exhibiting signs of growth stunting (Musiimenta & Bachou). In addition to malnourishment, anemia is a huge problem, especially among women and children. As of 2011, 24% of women were anemic, and 50% of Ugandan children were anemic. This iron deficiency is a side effect of the unbalanced diets and malnutrition that are common in Uganda. As a result of all of these illnesses, the farmers are weak and unable to keep up production, potentially costing the farmers, throwing them deeper into poverty (Uganda: Nutrition Profile). It has been stated that “the effects of stunting are largely irreversible beyond 2 years of age... meaning that more than 8 million people of working age are not able to achieve their potential as a consequence of childhood malnutrition” (Musiimenta & Bachou). This statistic shows the effect that malnutrition has not only on a person’s body, but also their livelihood and their agricultural productivity. The lack of agricultural productivity also affects the government because they are forced to pay “enormous amounts of money to treat [malnutrition] and related illnesses” (UNICEF).

As mentioned previously, malnutrition affects families by weakening the family members and causing them to not be able to put forth all of their energy to work on their farm lands. Malnutrition in Uganda is currently on the decline, but it is still abundant among rural families. There have been multiple programs trying to work to reduce malnutrition in Uganda, and so far they have been fairly successful in reducing the amount of people experiencing this debilitating illness.

Further improving the malnutrition status would benefit Uganda in many ways. To start off, from an ethical standpoint it is somewhat wrong for people living in countries with ample food to ignore all of the other people in the world. It is only right for the countries with the resources for international aid can contribute to international peace and stability by joining the fight against poverty and hunger. In addition to the humanitarian reasons for helping Uganda escape malnutrition, helping people get adequate food supplies would also take a lot of pressure off of the Ugandan government and help them to focus their energy on other things such as further developing their country in order to make the quality of life in Uganda better. Also, if other countries can help Uganda form a solid base for their agricultural system, they can one day become independent and able to support themselves without outside help. This would be an ideal end goal for any program that is developed to help Uganda and its people.

There are many different things that contribute to the malnutrition crisis in Uganda. Firstly, the growing population in Uganda is not making it any easier to feed an already starving population. According to the World Atlas, Uganda has the 9th highest population growth rate (Population Growth By Country). It will

be very hard for a country to become stable while they also have to figure out how to provide the resources for more people. In addition to the growing population, the Ugandan farmers are very at the will of the weather when it comes to when they can plant their crops. Although Uganda does not necessarily have terrible growing conditions, it is still possible for the farmers to be forced to wait longer to plant their fields, which will make harvest time come later, potentially starving the family for extra weeks. Another contributing factor to the malnutrition problem is water scarcity. Upwards of 8 million Ugandans do not have access to clean water (Uganda Water Crisis - Clean Water In Uganda). This can be a problem because the illnesses associated with not drinking safe water could potentially make the Ugandans lose any of the nutrients that they are able to consume.

Though it is easy to identify the problems that Uganda is facing, it can be very hard to think of solutions for such a widespread problem. There are some programs that are currently trying to relieve the country of malnutrition, but it is hard to eradicate it completely. A suggestion for a more effective way for handling helping the Ugandan population would be to form a coalition of sorts with all of the different relief programs. In addition to this being an idea to increase productivity among relief programs, it would also go along with the Sustainable Development Goals that have already been set. If a coalition could form, all of the organizations could collectively work on resolving the malnutrition problem, and they would have increased funds to do it. Why divide the resources when everyone could come together to help power the same company?

Some of the programs already involved in helping Ugandans escape malnutrition include Feed the Future, Action Against Hunger, and The Hunger Project. If one of these programs had to become a dominant program, the most logical choice would Action Against Hunger. They have already helped more people than either Feed the Future or The Hunger Project. Action Against Hunger also has some more name recognition than the other two, which would help the company to get noticed by potential donors. The Action Against Hunger initiative for Uganda began in 1995. Since then it has grown, and in the year 2016 alone they helped over 244,568 people gain access to the resources that they needed, such as nutritional support, safe water and sanitation, and economic security. Currently, Action Against Hunger is doing things like educating women and children how to read and properly and efficiently farm their land. In addition to this, they give families cash deposits to help pay for their children's schooling or any medical bills they might have. Action Against Hunger will also install water supplies or drill to find clean water during a drought. In order to help some of the people escape malnutrition, Action Against Hunger is currently giving a lot of education to people. They will teach mothers how to feed their children and they teach proper healthcare procedures and how to properly identify malnutrition (Action Against Hunger Uganda).

Despite Action Against Hunger already making very successful attempts to help the Ugandan population, there is always room for improvement. One of the most effective ways to improve the current Action Against Hunger initiatives would be to somehow offer subsidies or bonuses for the farmers of Uganda that would help the families to keep more of their food and be less malnourished. As stated before, Uganda actually has very optimal growing conditions, and yet a large portion of their population is starving. This fact suggests that the poor farmers are selling the majority of their crops to other people in order to make a profit to pay for things instead of feeding their family. Action Against Hunger would not necessarily have to sponsor these government subsidies, but if they could advertise and advocate for the installation of them and the importance of using them to increase the quality of life in Uganda, then that would greatly help the effort to ease and eventually end malnutrition. Getting Action Against Hunger involved in this would also allow people to donate funds to help support the government during the transition to supplying smallholder farm families with the subsidies (Action Against Hunger Uganda).

This solution would have the greatest impact on the government out of everyone. The Ugandan government is already taking some responsibility to improving the agriculture industry in their country,

but supplying the subsidies would be the best way to help the people of Uganda. Ugandan agriculture accounted for nearly 50% of the exports in 2012, meaning that it would not only benefit the average citizen to improve agriculture, but the government would also become more successful (Uganda National Web Portal). Subsidising farmers is definitely not a new idea. Even the United States, a country that is fully developed and referred to as a “world power”, has to subsidise their farmers in order to keep the agriculture industry in America from disappearing. The subsidies would be put to use in Uganda by allowing families to keep more of their food that they grow, which would help to reduce the number of starving and malnourished people.

Although it may seem like a risky plan for the government to subsidize Ugandan farming, this method has proved successful in some other developing African countries. In Malawi, subsidies were provided to farmers to help them buy the fertilizer that was essential for having higher crop yields. The subsidies were well monitored and handled extremely well, and because of this, the results were very positive. The increased sales that were generated through the use of subsidies were able to cover the cost of the actual subsidies three to four times over (Fleshman). After seeing the success of Malawi and their government, several other countries plan to follow in their footsteps. Uganda should also follow suit and adopt the subsidies that have already benefitted many other people.

The problem with subsidizing farming is that if the program is not put under strict supervision with some boundaries and limitations, it could easily spin out of control and people could start abusing the system. In order to combat this problem, it would be smart to only allow the farmers to use the money they receive from the subsidies to purchase cattle or chickens. Both of these animals would be very beneficial to the Ugandan farmers. Firstly, purchasing cattle would provide the family with dairy milk that they could drink to obtain calcium or sell to pay for any necessities, and they could eat the cattle to get protein, which would help to resolve the anemia that many people are experiencing. Purchasing chickens would also be very helpful for the families, as the eggs are a good source of protein, again helping to prevent anemia, and any extra eggs could be sold for profit. In addition to this, it would be very easy to breed the chickens which would enable the families to consume some of the chickens for even more protein and nutrients that they cannot get from the consumption of all of the starches that they grow.

Another conflict that could arise with the subsidies is over who should pay for them. The Ugandan government, while improving from their previous state, will still be very fragile and probably could not withstand the financial burden that the subsidies would bring to the table. The best suggestion for paying the subsidies would be to use the funds brought in by the charities, which would be increased if the previously mentioned plan to form a coalition is carried out. In addition to this, some more stable countries with resources available could loan the money needed. If the Ugandan subsidies have the same effects as the ones that were used in Malawi, the extra profits being brought in as a result of the better farming and the healthier population could be used to pay back any loans taken out.

Subsidising Ugandan farmers has many benefits for the people and will help to eventually eradicate malnutrition. The farmers are the base of the country. Once they are better off, it will be easier for the country to progress as a whole. The extra little bit of income will help the families to pay off their children’s schooling, meaning that in time Uganda as a whole will become a more educated and developed nation. Though supplying the subsidies may be a challenge for the still developing Ugandan government, it will be a worthwhile investment for Uganda. Relief programs such as Action Against Hunger will be able to help collect funds to support Uganda in any way it needs. The short term solutions of giving people food handouts and paying their bills will only work for so long. The government will have to sacrifice some of its funds in order to help get the farmers on their feet permanently, and then they can work on developing other areas.

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