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Mali: The Land Where Educational Growth Opportunities Abound

Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Nelson Mandela is one of the most famous names worldwide; he was also one of the most influential leaders in human history. However, if Nelson Mandela wouldn’t have received an education, he likely wouldn’t be as well known as he is today. The question then arises: how many other young minds have gone undeveloped due to a lack of education? While developed nations have steadily increased the quality of their educational systems over the past several decades, many developing countries still have a long road in front of them. Mali falls into the latter category. The country has arguably the worst education system in the world, but why is this relevant to food security? Everything in our world stems from education, whether politics, transportation systems, or science. Without adequate education systems, countries suffer from poverty, lack of medical resources, and most importantly, food security.

Mali is a landlocked country in western Africa with three natural zones: the southern tropical area, the central semiarid area, and the northern arid area (Central Intelligence Agency). According to the CIA World Factbook, thirty-four percent of Mali’s land is used for agricultural production. While over one-third of Mali is used for agriculture, nearly eighty percent of Malians depend on agriculture for both food and a living (Feed the Future). This can be attributed to the population density in the southern part of the country. Few Malians live in the northern region of the nation because of civil unrest, high terrorism rates, and arid conditions (CIA). Consequently, there is virtually no agricultural production in the northern regions of the country. Mali is an impoverished nation with high rates of violence and below-average life spans. When one sees all the setbacks present in Mali, it’s natural to resort to pessimism. However, I still believe opportunities abound within this western African nation.

The educational system in Mali has evolved over the past several decades, but indubitably still has a long way to go. In 1993, Mali implemented education as a constitutional right in its ten-year education development plan (Wilson). This plan was extended, and the constitutional right to education is still applicable to this day. While Mali is taking steps in the right direction, there is still a glaring need for education within the country. As a matter of fact, over half of Mali’s fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds are illiterate (UNICEF). With such a small pool of literate young adults, finding high-quality educators is a great challenge. The young people who had the privilege of receiving education typically go into higher paying, respected professions. Therefore, the few educators willing to teach were poorly educated themselves. Without knowledgeable educators, students’ knowledge base suffers. Even though Mali has taken strides to improve its education system, without quality teachers, education will still be sorely lacking. This is where the United States or other Westernized nations could provide assistance via educational resources and curriculum.

Education is split into three cycles in Mali. First, students go to primary school for six years, followed by another six years of secondary school, split into two, three-year terms (Wilson). This education is fairly similar to elementary, middle, and high school in the United States. Even though Malian education is free and compulsory up until the ninth grade, many families cannot afford the cost of transportation, writing supplies, and uniforms (Wilson). While education is free, the price of sending a student to school is steep. Education must be made more affordable if Mali hopes to increase literacy rates in the next few decades. Simply put, if Mali wishes to have families enroll their students in schools, it must be a financially

feasible option. Obviously, Mali still has a long way to go if they want to enhance its educational system for the coming generations.

In the country of Mali, gender greatly affects the duration of a student's educational career. While sixty-four percent of Malian boys finish primary school, only fifty-nine percent of Malian girls finish primary school (Wilson). In the United States, there is a huge contrast. There is a much higher percentage of females that finish high school than males (Applerouth). Not only that, but statistics show that women are also more likely to do well in academics. Dr. Jed Applerouth states that seventy percent of high school valedictorians are females in the United States. Women are excelling in the classroom in other countries, so why is that not the case in Mali? Ultimately, it comes down to the culture of the country at hand. Often, in Mali, young girls are forced out of the education system before they even finish primary school (Wilson). This can be for a variety of reasons, but one of the main reasons is because of premature marriages (Wilson). One in two Malian girls is married as a child (UNICEF). It's apparent that education, especially for a female, is simply not seen as a priority in Mali. The most important facets of life for a young woman in Mali are marriage, childbearing, and raising a family. This staggering fact supports that very claim: a mother's mean age at first birth in Mali is 19.2 (CIA). In comparison, most western countries have a mother's mean age at first birth between 25 and 30 years (CIA). Historical gender roles pose a significant challenge to education in Mali but can be overcome.

Food security also plays a massive part in the educational system of Mali. Time and time again, we find that in developing countries, economically unstable families must have their young children work as soon as they are old enough. Malian families are no different. The families, even if they find education important, cannot afford to both educate their children and feed their families; they must pick one or the other. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, food, a physiological need, always outweighs education, a self-actualization need. The idea of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is that the most basic necessities in life must be met prior to advancing to a higher level of emotional, physical, and mental understanding (McLeod). People must have food, water, shelter, and clothing before having health, property, and other resources (McLeod). In the same way, one cannot attend to friendships, a sense of connection, respect, self-esteem, and status without the basic necessities in life. The same is true for education. Students cannot learn adequately without having a stable source of food and water, because the thought of not having basic necessities is all-consuming. As one moves higher up the ladder of needs, one becomes more motivated to succeed (McLeod). Without necessities being met, it is very difficult for a student to be motivated. The less motivated a student is to be in the classroom, the less worthwhile it is to be educating students. Unfortunately enough, it has become blatantly obvious that food security is an essential part of education in Mali.

We have seen that food security is a great challenge within the country, but how can it be fixed? The United States Government has increased its presence in the nation over the past two decades (Feed the Future). Feed the Future, an organization through the United States Government's initiative focused on ending global hunger, has made a huge impact on the country in recent years (Feed the Future). The Feed the Future website even boasts that it has implemented the use of agricultural technology, stating that "over 330,000 Malian producers applied improved technologies and practices on 245,000 hectares of land, generating \$74.3 million in agricultural sales". The growth in Malian agriculture has been impressive. What's even more impressive is that when Feed the Future began its program in 2014, there were very few agriculturalists in the area that knew anything about agricultural economics, agronomy, or veterinary science (Feed the Future). With the astronomical economic and technological growth that Feed the Future has made in areas of Mali, it is readily apparent that Malian farmers are willing to learn new information and implement innovative techniques into their operations. It is helpful that Malian agriculturalists got on board because with rising production levels in the country, they will be hard-pressed to produce enough to feed their population by 2050. Mali has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, coming in at 2.97%, and food security is becoming even more important as the

population grows (CIA). The more resources that are given to Malian farmers, the more successful they will be long-term. Though funding is its own issue, the most influential help that can be given to flourishing agriculturalists is high-quality agricultural education.

While it's easy to find the solution to a problem, actually acquiring the resources to solve that problem is another challenge. In the case of Malian agriculture, funding and high-quality educators are needed to make food security issues things of the past, but what can be done to obtain the funding? The biggest part of beginning non-profit organizations is to speak up and ask for financial resources. According to the IRS website, "A corporation may deduct qualified contributions of up to 25 percent of its taxable income". Large corporations, small businesses, and even families are always looking for charitable organizations to donate to at the end of the fiscal year. Nonprofits started in westernized nations could potentially be taken over by villagers after the organization was established. For example, Americans could start nonprofit organizations, set up a 501(c)(3), begin fundraising, and get the project off the ground. After establishing the nonprofit organization in an African country, likely for five to ten years, members of the local community could maintain the nonprofit organization themselves. This would not only help promote education and decrease food security issues but would also allow for new job opportunities in villages. Paying villagers to run the nonprofit would allow them to provide new ideas to the mission, too. There would inevitably be major benefits to starting a nonprofit organization and helping develop it. Namely, job opportunities and educational experiences would abound. While it may seem like a daunting task at first, finding funding and other resources to establish nonprofit organizations in developing countries may actually be easier than one would think.

Not only could funding be obtained through donations from companies, corporations, families, and charitable organizations, but through government funding, too. Every year, the United States Government awards billions of dollars in grants to nonprofit organizations (*Find. apply. succeed*). While the donations from organizations and personal donors may be spotty and unreliable, grants from the government would be extremely dependable. Because the betterment of developing countries affects many different nations, there would likely be a large number of nations willing to donate to the cause. If a nonprofit organization can prove its worth to the masses, many grants would come available. The grants would, at the very least, get the nonprofit off the ground while potential donors were being contacted and informed about the project.

Another avenue within donations could focus on tangible resources. While many organizations or corporations struggle with sending money overseas, sending resources makes things much more clear-cut. For example, something that could be extremely useful in an agricultural education course would be equipment. Even small garden tractors would make a massive impact on some small farms and even communities within developing countries. Because of the poor infrastructure and lack of instruction when it comes to operating machinery, many developing countries are still very inefficient in their production of crops. The resources provided by corporations could change the tide of farming in developing countries, even Mali.

An organization that made a massive impact on the African Country of Tanzania is the nonprofit Educating Tanzania. Educating Tanzania sought to bring water, nutrition, health, and education to Tanzanian villages (Educate Tanzania). This program has grown greatly in the past several years and has even opened a 1000-acre university in Karagwe, Tanzania. At their Karagwe campus, they teach innovative new methods of farming and how to run agricultural businesses (Educate Tanzania). One of their current business ventures is based around producing and packaging fresh pineapple juice (Educate Tanzania). This business venture has taught students in the program about fair trade and gender equality. Not only that, but this pineapple processing plant has cut down on crop waste and has improved community health as a whole in the village (Educate Tanzania). Instilling an entrepreneurial mindset in people of all ages and backgrounds can make a massive impact on the community around them.

Agricultural-based schooling was a great way to better the village of Karagwe in Tanzania which leads one to believe that agricultural-based schooling would be a plausible solution to food insecurity in the country of Mali.

A similar structure could and should be used in the country of Mali because of the similarities between Tanzania and Mali. Both of the countries are in the continent of Africa and have a limited area to work with. Not only that, but Tanzanians and Malians both rely heavily on agriculture as a source of livelihood. Tanzania has also faced terrorism, civil unrest, and food insecurity. In the grand scheme of things, Tanzania and Mali are very similar in nature. The similarities between the two countries serve as evidence of what nonprofit organizations can do in foreign nations. There have already been outreach programs to grow the Malian's knowledge base of nutritionally sound meals, and implementing more seminars and classes will allow for more people to be reached (Feed the Future). The outreach programs put on by Feed the Future have reached over 166,000 children in Mali (Feed the Future). This number would only grow if the number of nonprofit organizations in the nation grew along with it.

While I do believe it's our duty to assist developing nations in improving food security, it's also imperative to recognize the differences in culture between western nations and developing nations. One of the worst things that we, as a Westernized civilization, could do is to force our ideas and beliefs onto other countries. "White saviorism" is defined as providing immediate solutions whilst neglecting to look at the long-term needs of individuals and communities (Murphy). The idea of "white saviorism" often comes out in times of supreme need but can also be seen to this day. We, as a Western culture, believe that our way of life is better than any other country in the world. Yet, this belief system is extraordinarily destructive. Any time Western cultures enter developing nations, they must be extremely careful to humbly bring ideas to the table. At a fundamental level, helping developing nations is virtuous, but having the correct intentions prior to assisting is necessary.

Another possible solution for the food security and education problems within the country could be solved through aid paid directly to the Malian government. Obviously, this solution is slightly more worrisome, seeing as the Malian government is less stable than the governments of most western nations. However, the country has been trying to implement vocational training programs for years but has not had sufficient funding (UNICEF). The most direct and simple way to financially support Malian government programs that push education is to send financial support to Mali, directly. The most effective way to spread an idea, though, is through people who are passionate about an endeavor. Nonprofits would likely have more follow-through than the Malian government because people that would be willing to begin a nonprofit are undoubtedly passionate about the cause. While going directly to the source and earmarking funds to be used in Malian educational development would be the easiest way to go about growing the educational system in Mali, ultimately, the best option is to encourage nonprofits to become established in the nation.

Nelson Mandela once stated, "No country can really develop unless its citizens are educated". Mali is an underdeveloped country but has opportunities around every corner. Nelson Mandela was a well-educated man. Had he not been educated, his political career would not have been as successful as it was. Education is one of the most basic and important parts of growing intellectually advanced citizens. By implementing agricultural education courses throughout the country, the food security needs of Mali would diminish significantly. The educational system in Mali is undoubtedly far behind many countries, but by optimizing nonprofit organizations and financially supporting educational endeavors in the country through government grants and tangible resources, education could become a strength of Mali, not a hindrance.

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