

Kara Lathrop
Adel DeSoto Minburn High School
Adel, Iowa

Political and Economic Problems in Kenya

Africa covers six percent of the earth's total surface and 20 percent of the landmass. With a population of over a billion, many of its 53 countries are unstable and poor. Kenya is one of these countries. With a majority of Kenyans living in poverty, disease and hunger are real and daily problems.

A typical subsistence farm in Kenya is generally little more than an acre, but it can usually produce enough to feed the family. That, however, does not give the family much to sell. This poses a problem that leaves little money for such things as clothing, proper housing, education, medical needs, pesticides, fertilizers, or seeds. Elevating their standing is impossible. They can survive but not prosper.

The family structure of a Kenyan family is that of ancient tradition. They are very group-orientated and are community self-reliant. This emulates Kenya's national motto, Harambee, meaning to pull together. Often times, whole families live with or near each other, sharing farm work or other duties. This includes grandparents, usually paternal, uncles, aunts, cousins, and close friends. A family is not just one of close kin, but of extended relations, creating a nuclear family.

Kenyans frequently have large families, especially in the rural areas, which comprise 64 percent of the population. In African families children are received with happiness and seen as caregivers in old age. The parents are seen as the living dead and need descendants to follow them and complete rights in their honor. With so many kids there is an economic strain on the family, and the child's prospects are diminished. To make matters worse, a wife is unable to refuse her husband and most forms of contraception are seen as a taboo, not only increasing population, but also spreading HIV infections.

While primary education has recently been provided for by the Kenyan government, it is often a question of whether or not the parents can afford to send their children to school and lose a work-hand. Without proper education and a chance to better themselves, the children and the economy suffer. Without education the children may not be able to elevate their standing, creating a never-ending cycle. Over 80 percent of children do attend primary school, but less than 30 percent continue on to secondary school. While the adult literacy rate is approximately 82 percent, this ability to read and write has not drastically changed living conditions yet.

The children who are able to go to school, usually those with more money, get into trouble themselves. Those fortunate enough to be able to attend prominent boarding schools often suffer. While away from home they are taken out of the influence of their family and extended family, therefore losing part of their identity. This had produced a startling rate of promiscuity, pregnancy, and AIDS. A substantial number of women drop out of school because they are pregnant, not only taking a toll on the economy, but the advancement of women in the professional world.

When entering into a marriage, it is most often a partnership between the families, rather than a commitment to love. A bride price really shows it is an alliance of families, and in some tribal cultures arranged marriages are still practiced. The bride price can also often be a hindrance

if the future husband's family is unable to pay, as is a very current problem. The bride price is seen as compensation for the father losing his daughter as a worker, but it is also constant to keep the families close and connected. Many young people choose to elope, upsetting both sides of the family and missing out on the help the families could have provided for each other.

There are still some tribal cultures today that continue to accept the practice of polygamy. The husband is able to have multiple wives, if he can support each individual family. Sometimes a wife will choose her husband's secondary wife for help, but for the most part women don't have much of a say. More education geared towards younger women will hopefully help the increasing population. However, it is very hard to break down the cultural barriers and change a way of life to something foreign when it means disregarding what they believe and what has been engrained in them since birth.

Agriculture is a major keystone in Kenya's economy, employing about 75 percent of the workforce. Out of all the food consumed by Kenyans, less than 20 percent of it is imported, and that is mainly for the wealthy. Cash crops like coffee, tea, tobacco, cotton, sisal, pyrethrum, and cashew nuts attribute to more than 50 percent of export earnings, the most profitable being tea. A typical subsistence farm may produce a wide range of crops including: beans, cassava, potatoes, maize, sorghum, and fruit. Beans, potatoes, wheat, and corn are most commonly grown for consumption while the others are sold.

Kenya has a very diverse climate, tropical, arid, and semi-arid depending on what part of the country. Most of Kenya does not receive enough rainfall each year to support a productive growing season; therefore population density and productivity are directly related to rainfall. For that reason there are a lot of pastoral societies. A pastoral society is a nomadic one. Their main source of agricultural revenue is their livestock--cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. Their wealth is related to animal ownership. The animals are used for transportation, milk, blood, meat, and wool.

Because most of Kenya receives less than adequate rainfall, pastoral societies are nomadic and move their animals to greener pastures. However, this lifestyle has very negative effects on health care, education, and the environment. Health care and education are not readily available to those adults and their kids while constantly moving around looking for places for their animals to graze. The environment is not thought of while herds of large animals are trampling in search of grasses. Education for the farmers and special places for the animals could have a positive impact on the land.

The major urban industrial centers of Kenya are located in Mombasa and Nairobi, the capital. Most of the work is related to processing agricultural goods. Dairy and meat industries, leather, paper, textile, and sugar production exist within these areas. They also manufacture machinery and motor vehicles from imported raw materials. Kenya doesn't have significant resources available, however, they have been successful in using alkaline for glass-making, volcanic lava for stone, and limestone for cement.

There are many factors inhibiting Kenyans. Only 57 percent of available water is safe to drink, posing health problems. The Ministry of Health indicated that there was only one doctor for every 100,000 people, while the World Health Organization recommends one doctor for every 5,000 people. The people are unable to drink safe water, get enough nutrients, and don't have proper health care readily available. That makes for a perfect breeding ground for disease and squalor.

The natural lay of the land and original plants have been removed or changed to support farming. Deforestation leads to desertification, which is exacerbated by Kenya's lack of rain. Erosion and the degradation of land make it unable to support crops at all much less with a high, productive yield. The rivers and lakes, most notably Lake Victoria, are being clogged with topsoil and pollutants, choking and killing the fish.

Since the beginning there has been tension among Kenya's 42 ethnic groups. The Kikuyu are Kenya's largest and essentially most influential of all the groups. They account for 22 per cent of Kenya's 36 billion in population. Kenya's first post-independence leader, Jomo Kenyatta, who served from 1964 to 1978, was a Kikuyu. Current president, Mwai Kibaki, is a born Kikuyu and in the last free election held there was major tension and violence between the Kikuyu and the Luo, another large ethnic group in Kenya.

Since Kenya's independence in 1963 conditions remained relatively stable until recently. That changed in the last election held on December 27, 2007. The two main candidates were Kibaki, a Kikuyu, and Raila Odinga, a Luo. There is major controversy over who really won the election because of widespread evidence of ballot rigging, but Kibaki was still named the president. Major violence broke out after the elections all over the county, mainly between the two different ethnic groups. An estimated 2,000 people were killed and 50,000 displaced, essentially becoming refugees.

With this, the people have lost faith in their government and their leader, feeling they have almost gone back to a dictatorship if they can't even have honest elections anymore. To try to solve the crisis gripping the country, Kibaki and Odinga went into a power-sharing agreement, making Odinga the new prime minister. However, thousands of people have been taken out of their homes and therefore their jobs, causing some women to resort to prostitution to feed their families in the camps. People need to be able to trust in their government for it to work to their advantage, and with so many people displaced and not being able to work, their economy and food supply is taking a hit.

The Kenyan government should do more to restore the people's faith, some of which means doing a little less. Increased government intrusion into private matters and poor terms of trade has made the manufacturing division uncompetitive. The elections for president should also be completely honest and free of question because when that power is stripped from the people they lose all faith and security.

Another great problem with the Kenyan people is unemployment. It has reached an astounding rate in Kenya. Out of the youth, ages 14 to 24, over 2 million are out of work, and another 750,000 are expected to join each year. That is creating a huge class problem; nearly 50 percent of Kenyans are living below the poverty line, 60 percent being those under 18. The youth is the future work force, if they are unable to get jobs and training that will be an even bigger problem in the future. Social programs and other initiatives are being implemented to ease the unemployment crisis.

Even those who are working feel they are not receiving what they should be earning for their efforts. Currently Kenyans in certain cities are living off of Sh6,130 (\$82) a month, while those in agriculture are receiving Sh3,043 (\$41). Inflation is another staggering dilemma; it is rising, while wages are not. Citizens are unable to keep up with the cost of living. The average rate of inflation in 2008 was 26.2 percent compared to 9.8 percent in 2007. Famine has played a large role in that due to a shortfall in rain. Food prices rose by 36 percent while energy prices rose by another 22 percent.

Women in Kenya are at a disadvantage to men. Women are not seen as equals, which is prevalent in the education of women compared to men and the lack of professional and government positions held by women. In some cultures when a woman is widowed, the husband's family inherits her and her children. In one case a woman refused to be inherited and the marriage was declared a divorce. Her deceased husband's family seized his body, and he was buried as a single man. A woman should be seen as an equal to a man.

Polygamy is another example of inequality. A man may have multiple junior wives, while a woman has little say over her own destiny. A daughter is seen as a piece of wealth, relating to the bride price as a way for the family to make money off of her. To bring Kenya into this century and a current mindset, women must have all the rights given to men and be seen as an equal, not a prize or something to be owned.

However, Kenyan women are very self-sufficient. They take care of their children and often have garden plots they tend to feed their families. They are strong and resourceful in the realms which they control. The government and all others just need to see them as that as well.

Food insecurity is prevalent in Kenya, and many steps need to be taken to diminish that, however costly. The Kenyan government, the World Bank, the United Nations, and other private and volunteer organizations need to take initiatives to assist Kenya. There needs to be education for the Kenyan people that integrates and reflects their culture and lifestyle, so not to estrange the citizens and the efforts fail. If Kenya becomes completely sufficient, it will no longer need assistance, therefore the efforts and cost will not be wasted.

Kenya's government estimates that 10 million people are affected by food insecurity and need emergency food support. The Kenyan government has asked for Sh37 billion in relief aid to meet the needs of the affected citizens. The government had set aside Sh5 billion and needed assistance to compensate for the shortfall. Currently the Kenyan government and the World Food Programme are able to feed 1.4 million of the starving and another 1 million are being helped through direct government intervention.

The World Food Bank should reform its Structural Adjustment Programs so Kenya isn't forced into further debt and isolation from other countries. Some of Kenya's debt should be forgiven or set aside for the time being to focus on the major issues at hand. Kenya needs to be brought out of the Third World and that will never happen if they have a huge cloud overhead and are unable to get assistance in time of need to better their people and end starvation.

The ultimate answer to ending hunger and food insecurity is education, education of the farmer and the people, especially the children. With farmer education there will be higher yields of crops and less degradation to the land. Knowing what to grow and when will help, as will reintroducing natural plant species and stopping erosion and soil degradation. Pastoral farmers need to become more aware of what they are doing to their home country and how that affects the land and therefore their food supply.

In conclusion, Kenya is greatly affected by food insecurity. Some contributing factors include: political and government influences, farmer ignorance, habitat degradation, and lack of education. Education for women and families is especially urgent to help ease the increasing population and the demands that brings. Discrimination between various tribal cultures also plays a big role, the people are unable to trust in their government leading to violent outbreaks and

worsening conditions. Inflation, low wages, and unemployment are leaving Kenyans helpless and angry.

With education, a sounder government, and relief aid, Kenya will hopefully be able to move out of third world status and into the 20th century. However without any intervening action Kenya is looking at a bleak future for each citizen and the country as a whole. The whole world needs to join together, for every life counts and every person has a right to life and success. If drastic actions are not taken the country may be able to survive, but it will not prosper and the lives of the individuals will not exceed limits.

When Nobel laureate, agronomist, and humanist Norman Borlaug died just three weeks ago on September 12th 2009, he still had a problem. Africa. During his life he experimented with crop production, particularly wheat, and eventually created a dwarf strain that helped secure food supplies in Mexico, India, and Pakistan. Credited with starting the Green Revolution and saving a billion lives during his career, he had yet to save Africa. Kenya could be the poster child for countries in need in this vast continent. We must continue on with Borlaug's passion to bring a healthy lifestyle and secure food supply to the poor countries that make up the world's second largest continent. The need is urgent and time is running out daily for young and old alike.

Works Cited

- Barasa, Lucas. "The day Kenya workers' anger boiled over." Daily Nation. 1 May 2009. 15 September 2009 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/593070/-/item/0/-/y9gd01/-/index.html>>
- Fletcher, Hannah and Nick Wadham. "The tribalism that colours Kenyan life." Times Online. 2 January 2008. News International. 12 September 2009 <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article3122692.ece>>
- "Kenya." Jambo Kenya. 2004. Jambo Kenya Network. 15 September 2009 <<http://www.jambokenya.com/jambo/kenya/econ02.htm>>
- Kariuki, Anthony. "Kenya seeks Sh32bn food aid." Daily Nation. 16 January 2009. 15 September 2009 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/515550/-/item/0/-/h9eevn/-/index.html>>
- Kumba, Samwel. "The day Kenya workers' anger boiled over." Daily Nation. 1 May 2009. 15 September 2009 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/593070/-/item/0/-/y9gd01/-/index.html>>
- Mulama, Joyce. "WORLD HEALTH DAY: Kenyan Medics Deplore Low Pay, Scarce Incentives." The Story Underneath. 5 April 2009. IPS. 15 September 2009 <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32785>>
- The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs. "Background Note: Kenya." U.S. Department of State. July 2009. Bureau of Public Affairs. 12 September 2009 <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2962.htm>>