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Nepal, Factor 19: Foreign Aid

Nepal: Aid to the Farmers

Introduction:

Mount Everest, standing at 29,029 feet, is the highest point on planet Earth. Thrill seekers see it as the ultimate challenge, to risk their lives to reach the point where a man can be closest to space with his feet still on the ground. But while those who dream about battling their way to the top of the world, the people in the valley below fight a different battle. Nepal, home to the *top of the world*, is also home to a changing climate and extreme poverty, two conditions that create a cycle of food insecurity. More than seventy percent of the population in Nepal works in agriculture, yet it has one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world (“Rural Poverty in Nepal”) Nepalese farmers use antiquated practices and tools and thus struggle to grow enough to feed their families. Those who manage to grow a surplus lack access to markets. Safe and travelable roads, especially leading into the mountains where food is most scarce are rare and vulnerable. Earthquakes, rockslides and other disasters are common and play a large role in keeping the people hungry. Those who manage to survive the initial disaster often starve to death afterwards because their crops had been wiped out and the precious few roads destroyed, making it difficult to transport food into the area. Parents often must watch their children slowly starve to death before their eyes and there is little to nothing they can do for them. The children that do survive must work to aid their families, sometimes up to 14 hours a day (“Happy Children Trust: Nepal & Poverty”). Parents may decide to sell a child to help feed the others. Education is uncommon and in most cases low quality, giving children, especially girls, no chance of breaking this cycle of poverty. They soon watch their own children starve before their eyes just as their parents did before them. While others dream about concurring Everest, these people only dream of not going to bed hungry. How is it possible for human kind to reach the top of the world and yet thousands die below it from hunger? The world has taken steps to end hunger, many countries donating millions of dollars in aid to the more impoverished ones. Yet instead of helping the country become independently stable, the aid gives the providing country control over the other, for if it were to remove its aid, the other would fall right back into poverty, and millions of people would starve. The right to food should be unalienable; no man, woman, or nation should have the power to take that away, especially for political reasons! It is our responsibility to prevent this violation of rights!

About Nepal, Her Families, and Farmers

Nepal is a diversified country, with a population of 28.7 million (“Nepal Population”) made up of 60 different ethnicities (Foundation Nepal). About 80 percent of Nepal's people live in rural areas and depend on subsistence farming for their livelihoods, according to the Rural Poverty Portal. A typical family in Nepal is patrimonial. A son and his wife and children will live with his father, usually until the father's death. After, the male offspring split the inheritance and become the head of their households. Daughters marry and leave their family to live with their husbands'. Most marriages are arranged, especially in rural areas where modern ideas have not replaced tradition. Public displays of affection are taboo, even after marriage. Having children is very important and combined with the high infant mortality rate means that families typically have many children. The infant mortality rate of Nepal is 48.61 per 1000 live births, compared to the USA which is only 6.2 (“Infant Mortality Rates of Countries”). Of the children that survive infancy, over half are chronically malnourished and 1 in 10 never make it to age 5. The education system is one of the newest in the world and is low quality. While primary school is free, parents must pay the cost of uniforms, books and other supplies as there is little government funding. Dropout rates are high, especially among girls who normally leave around the age of 12 or 13 or if they

fail a year. Many times, especially in poor rural settings, parents choose not to send their children to school. Instead, children provide labor to help keep the family from starving. Many poor parents who did not receive an education themselves do not send their children to school; they do not see the benefits an education could have on economic standing. Girls and members of the lower and poorer castes face much discrimination. Around 50% of Dalit, the lowest caste, never attend school and they have the lowest rate of completing primary school in the country (Mathema). Higher education is very uncommon, especially for rural people, and those who can afford it usually send their children to other countries. Health care, like education is rare for poor rural families. Himalayan Healthcare claims that “rural healthcare services are at best rudimentary, with government health posts often going unstaffed and undersupplied for years.” Vaccination rates are low. Many children die of easily treatable illnesses such as diarrhea or infections because they have no access to medicine. Unsanitary conditions and low access to clean water also plays a large role. The Happy Children Trust states that half of the population has no access to toilets and for every child doctor there are 100,000 patients! Malnutrition is also a large problem, especially among children; it causes stunting and other physical and mental problems. Poor families have a limited diet, consisting mostly on what they grow themselves or gain from selling their small, if existent, surplus. Vegetables, milk, and meat are rare, causing deficiencies in vitamins and minerals such as iron and Vitamin A. This leads to high anemia rates in woman. Around 50% of all adult woman in Nepal are anemic. The rate is even higher among pregnant woman (Dowling).

Rural families in Nepal are typically sustenance farmers with small landholdings. Seventy percent of the rural families have less than one hector of land, nonsufficient to their needs. The country has a feudal approach to landowning, also contributing to the inadequate distribution of land. The main crop grown is rice, but wheat and corn are also common. Some fortunate families are also able to produce a small number of cash crops such as potatoes or tobacco in which they sell to help fulfil their family’s needs. However, most hardly produce enough to feed their own families, let alone manage to produce a surplus. In the poorer, mountainous regions, it is even more difficult to produce a crop due to poor soil conditions and out dated farming techniques. Any surplus is normally shipped outside of the country because it is simpler and less expensive than trying to transport it through Nepal’s mountainous terrain. Livestock such as cattle, poultry and goats are not unheard of but the quality is low and there are not enough to meet the local need (“Nepal – Agriculture”). Irrigation systems are scarce and difficult to construct in the rugged terrain. Modern farming techniques are not generally used, most farmers sticking with traditional methods such as “using livestock for ploughing land, using livestock’s waste as manure, employing old seeds and local labor.” (“Traditional Farming in Nepal”). Many farmers, especially those in colder climates are only capable of producing one crop yearly. However, the government has begun to distribute fertilizers and new seeds in an attempt to curb the food deficit in the country. The effort has not been very effective; corruption and political keep many farmers from receiving any aid. Insufficient transportation systems also prevent aid from reaching farmers in the mountains. In addition, the chemical fertilizers harm the environment and pollute the scarce and precious clean water supply. Deforestation is similarly dangerous because it causes massive erosion. The rocky landscape combined with frequent storms often leads to rock or mudslides, capable of destroying entire crop fields. Earthquakes are also a frequent occurrence in Nepal. In April and May of this year, two massive earthquakes rocked Nepal. The two caused more than 8.5 thousand deaths according to David Stout, a *Times* magazine reporter, and left millions homeless. Monsoons also pose a threat, ready to destroy what is left of the insubstantial transportation system. With so many challenges to overcome, Nepal must turn to others for help.

Foreign Aid – A New Design

Nepal’s food insecurity has become the subject of foreign aid, especially in light of the recent disasters. Relief workers and supplies such as blankets, tents, medicine and food have been rushed into the country to aid the survivors. Other organizations, such as USAID, which already had a major presence in the country, are working on a more permanent solution to the hunger issue. Through its *Feed the Future* initiative, the organization plans on increasing agricultural productivity by: introducing modern

techniques and technologies as well as higher valued crops, expanding irrigation, improving the infrastructure of markets and their relations to farmers, as well as providing technical support and training for the new methods. It also attempts to lessen discrimination against women by promoting female farm practices. According to the USAID website, the *Feed the Future* program plans on helping 165,000 vulnerable Nepali escape poverty over the next five years. USAID also provides “other efforts [that] address agriculture policy reform and the trade and investment climate to improve Nepal's business enabling environment.” Former sustenance farmer Ram Prasad Chaudhary recounts his experience to *Frontline*, a USAID inspired newspaper. He had been forced to work as a mason because his farm just did not produce enough to support his family. Despite the extra wages, his profit was still insufficient and his family suffered. With help from USAID, Chaudhary was able to add an acre to his land and begin producing two harvests a year with higher valued crops such as chili peppers or cauliflower which he could sell to buy better food, health care and education for his family. In five years, he more than tripled his income! The World Food Programme also provides aid. In 2013, it began “a new five-year Country Programme through actively supporting the Government of Nepal in tackling food insecurity, focusing on social safety nets in the areas of nutrition, education and rural livelihoods support.” (“Nepal – Overview”) With enough resources, it will benefit around 410,000 people. Other foreign aid programs are also working with the Nepali government to increase agricultural productivity by increasing infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems and dams to create reservoirs and hydroelectric power, such as the Tanahu Hydropower Project. Nevertheless, many problems stem from foreign aid.

Nepal has become entirely too dependent on international help. Corruption, political standoffs and lack of resources have kept the Nepali government reliant on foreign aid, and has disillusioned the Nepalese toward their government. This is potentially dangerous especially due to the political instability of the country. International relations are easily broken, and for Nepal to lose the aid it is receiving due to political unrest would be catastrophic. As of May 2015, Australian budget cuts have cut almost 40% of their aid programs to Nepal, a loss of over 1 billion dollars! Great Britain is threatening to cut its \$128 million budget to Nepal unless corruption and discrimination against women is brought to an end. Other organizations funnel aid money into the country through non-government administrations, increasing dependence of foreign aid as the government does not have enough money to begin its own projects to stabilize the country and decrease food insecurity. Many nations use aid as a political weapon, as leverage over the country to keep it in line. If the receiving country does something that is not in the best interest of the country providing the aid, it can simply stop giving it. So while the politicians play their games the millions of poor people who depended on that aid to survive suffer greatly. Foreign aid makes up about two thirds of the financial budget of Nepal, so if it were stopped, millions of Nepali would feel the consequences. Organizations and governments need to find a way to work with the Nepali government so it can eventually take over the projects. If not, as soon as the aid dries up, for whatever reason be it political or economic, the country will be plunged right back into extreme poverty, maybe even worse than it was before. Organizations like USAID and WFP have already begun this process, having several finished projects that were a success and continued to be after their involvement ended. Nevertheless, it is not enough. Other organizations need to begin to follow USAID's and WFP's example, or Nepal may soon be facing a crisis larger than its current one.

Conclusion:

Nepal is the 19th poorest country in the world (“Global Finance Magazine”). With over fifty percent of the population under the poverty line, it is in great need of reform. Political corruption and instability, poor soil quality and farming techniques as well as natural disasters have created a serious food deficit in Nepal. While reforms are being made, mostly through foreign aid, are not sufficient and leave the government more unstable and dependent on outside aid to keep the people from starving. The Nepalese government and the sources of the foreign aid must find a way to work together to create a more permanent solution in which the Nepali government has the power to keep up as aid begins to disappear. However, for various political and economic reasons, “aiding” countries keep the control out of the hands

of the Nepali government, choosing to fund projects through organizations unaffiliated with the government. But then what is the point of aiding a country out of poverty when as soon as you leave it will fall right back in? How can a government feel that political control over a country is more important than really overcoming the poverty that plagues it? It is really unbelievable that in today's society, with all the technology we have, people still die from the easily solved problem of hunger. The world produces enough food to feed everyone, and yet due to political, economic and selfish reasons, hunger is still a large issue. People need to wake up and see that the right to food, the right to not go to bed hungry, is that of every single human on this planet, whether they be as rich as Bill Gates or as poor as a struggling farmer in the Nepalese Himalayas. We need to work together and mount this summit of hunger, concurring it once and for all!

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