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Ethiopia: Addressing issues leading to malnutrition

Ethiopia is very unique in its many diverse geographic environments. Mountains, high plateaus, deep gorges, river valleys, and lowland plains all make up the surroundings. Some call Ethiopia the “water tower” of Eastern Africa because of the many rivers that flow through the country into neighboring countries (Reynolds). Ethiopia is about one million square miles, about the same size as Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico combined. The capital is Addis Ababa, and is the largest city with a population of three point four million people. Literacy rate is an astonishing forty-three percent, less than half the population of Ethiopia has the necessary ability to read. The natural resources include salt, gold, copper and natural gas. Some of the many things that grow there include coffee cereals, pulses, oilseeds, meat, hides and skins. The factories in Ethiopia are mostly textiles, leather products, construction or cement, and hydroelectric power ("Background Note: Ethiopia").

The average subsistence farm family consists of eight members, two parents and six children. Women get married around the age of sixteen and already begin to have children around eighteen (“Family Planning: Ethiopia” 1-2). The number of children of primary school age accounts for one-fifth of Ethiopia’s entire population. Out of all the kids of school age, only thirty-six percent are enrolled in primary school. Although primary schooling is free, families living on less than a dollar a day find it difficult to pay for school expenses such as school uniforms, books, and supplies. Some families depend on the child’s labor at home or on the farm for survival and are reluctant to send their kids to school. Children in primary school have to walk long distances over rough terrain to attend crowded classrooms taught by ill-trained teachers and inadequate school materials. Four out of ten kids will not reach their education potential without proper educational opportunities (“unicef”).

Ethiopia has a long history, and is home to the oldest hominid bone discovery, making it the earliest known location of human ancestors. According to myth, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Menelik I, founded the Ethiopian Empire. Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia in the fourth century A.D. by missionaries from Egypt and Syria. Since 1994 Ethiopia has been a federal republic under their constitution. The current president is Girma Wolde-Giorgis. The government is very involved in the economy of Ethiopia, implementing the Growth and Transformation Plan. The Growth and Transformation Plan hopes to achieve an average growth rate of eleven percent and meet all development goals. The economy depends mostly on agriculture, which contributes to more than seventy-five percent of all exports, and gives jobs to eighty percent of the population. The main agricultural export crop is coffee, making up approximately thirty percent of all exports. Other popular exports include finished leather goods, pulses, oilseeds, and “khat,” a leafy narcotic that is chewed. Despite agriculture being the main economic resource, Ethiopia has many troubles with their agriculture including drought, soil degradation, improper agriculture practices, deforestation, undeveloped water resources and poor transportation ("Background Note: Ethiopia"). The issue of malnutrition stems from all these issues, Ethiopia has been struggling with this issue for years and will need some serious help to end this deadly cycle.

Malnourishment is a deadly cycle; Ethiopian farmers cannot produce enough to feed their family and sell to make a profit and with a large family it makes it all the harder to get the food needed by the family. Families cannot afford proper meals for their family, or supplies for their farm.

About three-fourths of Ethiopia’s entire population depends on agriculture, including subsistence and rain-fed farming, and livestock. Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, having almost one-

fourth of their population living on a dollar or less each day (“Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department”). Cereals, tubers and root crops, pulses, and oil seeds make up the main diet of the Ethiopian family. Despite having a larger livestock populace, meat supply is very limited. The dietary and nutritional needs of Ethiopians are not being met and almost half the population suffers malnourishment (“Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department”).

In 2000 eighty-seven percent of rural families farmed on less than two hectares, about five acres, of land. The average Ethiopian farm can only generate enough goods to reach fifty percent of the profit needed to live out of poverty. Most families live on three hundred and ninety dollars a year and most of their money comes from livestock. Men often work eighty hours a week and women about one hundred and twenty-six hours a week, that rounds to eighteen hour days for women. Necessities such as salt, oil, pots and clothing can be bought at market which is a one to three hour walk for most (“500 words a day on whatever I want”). There are many challenges we face with Ethiopia’s poverty and malnutrition issue. Farm sizes are shrinking, decreasing yield and profit, but also quality of soil. All these factors must be taken into consideration when addressing malnourishment that greatly affects Ethiopians.

Farmland is becoming less and less fertile from misuse and desperate farmers cutting corners. The misuse of fallow cycles and rotation leads to declining soil quality and fertility in highlands (Gebreselassie). With farm sizes declining, fallowing, resting the land, practices are not being executed. Ethiopian farmers also have the disadvantage of not having the equipment and resources that farmers from more developed countries have at their fingertips. The fertile land that is left in Ethiopia is being taken from local tribes and leased to foreign countries to grow and export crops. Meanwhile, thousands who depended on the land starve. The issue of foreign countries couldn’t have come at a worse time; Ethiopia is in the middle of the worst drought the country has seen on sixty years. Making it harder to grow crops, raise livestock, and feed their families (“Survival International” 1-2). In 2008, after a heavy rain season followed by a drought, many Ethiopian farm families were left without food. One family was forced to eat the seed they had saved from the last year’s crop instead of planting it. (source needs to be cited)

Almost half of Ethiopians gross income stems from agriculture (“Global Food Security”). But the number one source of income for this third-world country could be seriously jeopardized. Unless this problem is contained, Ethiopia’s ability to feed livestock and its human population will be virtually impossible. A food based intervention is needed to bring vitamins and nutrients to the population to improve overall nutrition (Belachew 75-130). Agricultural and malnutrition trends are worsening in Ethiopia, with the increase of disease and several climate challenges this country faces, serious steps need to be taken in order to help this suffering population.

Oxfam’s Horn of Africa Director, Abera Tola, states:

“People who are already poor and marginalized are struggling to cope with the added burden of increasingly unpredictable weather,”

He continues on the subject by adding,

“It is getting harder and harder for families and communities to bounce back from ever-changing, inconsistent weather affecting their livelihoods, and many have been forced to sell livestock or remove children from school- coping mechanisms that only increase the cycle of vulnerability.” (“Oxfam International”)

The Horn of Africa is prone to water shortages, poor sanitation and lack of access to a clean water supply. Forty-nine million, of Ethiopia’s eighty-five million people lack safe water and seventy-five million have no sanitation services and thirty-eight percent live in poverty (“Water.org”). Another issue that is amassed

on the shoulders of Ethiopians is the crisis of air and water pollution, which affect crop production and quality of life especially in the areas closest to factories and cities.

Many people and organizations have given multiple solutions that they believe to be the best answer to Ethiopia's growing problem of malnutrition. Obviously some serious intervention needs to take place in Ethiopia for the inhabitants to be able to live a full life, and to give their children a better life. I believe there is no one issue that needs to change for Ethiopia to be miraculously alleviated from disease, malnutrition, and an unpredictable weather pattern. Several steps need to be taken for Ethiopia to have a fighting chance. I trust the age old mantra "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day, but teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime". Subsistence farmers need to be taught how and what to grow and farm on their land in order to get the most crop with as little damage to the land as possible. Non-profit organizations can focus their work onto teaching subsistence farmers about sustainable agricultural practices. Using the manure from the rather large livestock population to fertilize crops and increase soil nutrients, conservation tillage to decrease soil erosion, and the rotational grazing of livestock can all be taught to the subsistence farmers. The farmers can then designate and teach one of their own to teach those in other villages to ensure the continuation of the education process on an exponential level. With the knowledge of how to farm correctly, they could teach their children and keep the cycles of responsible and sensible farming strong.

Giving Ethiopians the knowledge of how to farm responsibly means nothing if they don't have the resources needed to use that knowledge. Water sanitation is huge. Many water borne diseases pass through the water supply of Ethiopia such as, malaria and diarrhea. Access to safe and clean water needs to be greatly improved. Farmers who do not have access to safe water cannot stay healthy enough to farm their land properly. Safe water keeps people healthy and strong, when people feel better they can work easier and cognitive functions greatly increase. Also, access to cleaner water for irrigation could vastly improve crop yield.

More outspoken threats in our world receive immediate attention, such as flood relief, hurricane and earthquake aid, and severe droughts. But malnutrition is often overlooked or simply ignored. Malnutrition is a problem that can no longer be swept under the rug. Ethiopian children are among the highest percentages worldwide for stunted and abnormal growth, which originates from lack of nutrition or lack of access to suitable food and water. While Ethiopia is trying to boost their economy and human development they are failing to notice that the nutrition of children and family planning are not being taken care of as they should. But one must realize that if the issue of malnutrition is taken care of, the economy cannot improve without healthy citizens and workers. Malnutrition leads to the need of more health care services, which take away money that could be used for economic development. A healthier population would mean less need for health services, releasing those funds for use in other matters.

Malnutrition not only affects the person or the family but it influences economy. There are varying consequences related to malnutrition such as a higher mortality rate, which leads to a lower economic potential of the entire country, lower cognitive development, sending Ethiopia into a trend of slower learning capabilities. The result of stunted growth means less physical aptitude for the population, decreased farming, which makes up the biggest chunk of the Ethiopian economy and less workers or slower workers for the industries. Stunted growth is also seen more in rural communities as opposed to an urban landscape; the farmers and agriculturally sustained are being hurt more by the affects of malnutrition than those living in cities.

Ethiopia has great potential with the resources they have. But the potential remains unseen and the land is being seriously degraded as a result. Because of the cultivation methods used in farming of cereal, the top soil erosion is enormous, an estimated one thousand nine hundred million tons per year. The affect of this degradation is huge on the community that needs the agriculture to live, which is well over half the population. Bringing me back to the point of teaching and showing the farmers methods and "tips of the

trade”, to keep the land as healthy as possible (Bellete 9-32). Ethiopians could also be taught how to grow and take care of community gardens. With the whole community working together and sharing the result the health of that whole community could increase. These gardens that only go to feed those in the community could greatly benefit the population in more ways than just another method of attaining food, but it could bring the community together and help everyone to depend on each other, and not try to take on the losing battle of malnutrition on their own.

Many people talk of problems. It is easy to see a problem and know fix it. People many know what needs to be done to fix something, but that does not mean this solution is realistic. The solution needs to be brought back home. The Toms shoe company has brought the solution closer to home. For every pair of shoes that is sold to a costumer, a pair will be given to someone in need. It is not just the shoes that make it easier for the recipients to traverse many miles to simply get to a market, school, or even safe water supply. It brings people hope, and hope for a poor country like Ethiopia can go a long way. Big water bottle companies can have the same principle. For every bottle of water that is sold a bottle goes to Ethiopia and other countries without access to safe drinking water. Or for every number of bottles that are sold, a water treatment plant will be built. These solutions can be so simple, yet so effective if everyone cared just enough to try.

There is not just one underlying cause of malnutrition in Ethiopia. Politics, economy, trade, all contribute to this silent killer. There must be serious changes to the way people look at farming in Ethiopia for there to be change. And once the people are healthier and able to produce more, the economy in turn will begin to improve. Though the water resources in Ethiopia and considered abundant, most of the water carries diseases such as malaria and remains untreated because of lack of sanitation systems present. After teaching the farmers how to farm and increasing profit and increasing the economy, the government can then look to improving the water situation by developing more sanitation services and introduce irrigation to the arid lowlands. It is not a quick fix nor does it have instantaneous results; it will take time to help the farmers, waiting until the profit leaks to the economy, and then waiting until the government implements the new profit back into the community. Ethiopia is in a deep hole of poverty and malnutrition, but with help and a little bit of time Ethiopia can start digging itself out of a hole of despair and begin improving their quality of life for the next generations to come (Bellete 9-32).

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