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Venezuela, Malnutrition

Venezuela: Securing the Future of a Nation in Shambles, The Effects of Malnutrition on Venezuelan Children's Health and Education

Venezuela is a federal republic in the northern section of South America and has a population of over 31 million people. Bordering Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, ABC Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela has a total land area of 916,445 km² and is ranked number 7 of nations with the most biodiversity. Venezuela has a tropical, hot, humid climate, and a more moderate climate in the highlands. Venezuela is among the most urbanized countries in Latin America; the vast majority of Venezuelans live in northern cities, especially in the capital and largest city, Caracas. Rural population in Venezuela is reported at 10.96% and the urban population at 89.04% in 2016 ("Venezuela - Rural Population", 2016). The 1998 election stemmed from the loss of confidence in the existing party system and saw the rise of Hugo Chavez, the launch of the Bolivarian Revolution, and a new constitution. The government established a populist social welfare policy which initially boosted the economy and temporarily increased social spending, which reduced poverty. These policies later led to the destabilization of the country largely because of the extreme fossil fuel subsidy.

Venezuela has the largest known oil reserves of any country, which previously made up 95% of their exports, with some cocoa and coffee exports. Venezuela imports most of its food since discovering its vast oil reserves, and plays a smaller role in the economy than virtually any other Latin American country. After the 1980s oil glut Venezuela found itself in an economic and debt crisis. In 1995, inflation rose to 100% and poverty rates hit 66%. Inflation is now over 800%, with the current highest inflation of any country in the world. The results have been catastrophic including but not limited to, hyperinflation, economic depression, shortage of goods, increase in unemployment, poverty, illness, child/infant mortality, severe malnutrition, civil unrest, and crime. The Venezuelan economic downturn has led to deadly shortages of food and medicine, with most of the population flooding food lines, the creation of black markets for household goods, and underground pharmacies being set up. Healthcare and education have taken a major blow with school attendance rates plummeting due to hunger, illness, or lack of staff. With imports virtually unavailable, few locally produced goods, and oncoming sanctions, the people of Venezuela are facing an extreme humanitarian crisis.

The ability of Venezuelan farmers to produce crops is greatly inhibited because the majority of supplies used to cultivate the land and care for livestock are imported. Agricultural land makes up 24.5% of land use in Venezuela, with only 13.1% being arable land, permanent crops taking up 0.8%, and permanent pastures 20.6% ("The CIA World Factbook: VENEZUELA.", 2018). Agriculture has continuously declined, accounting for about 5% GDP and 10% of employment in 2004. According to a government survey in 1997, only 3.4 million hectares of land are suitable for farming, and some 17.1 million hectares are suitable for pastures. However only .7 million hectares were employed in grain production. Nationalization of land has also given the government the majority of power regarding agricultural distribution. Crime also plays a role in food shortages and decline in successful farming as crops and livestock are frequently stolen from farmers.

Venezuelan families range from rural to urban living. In rural areas families tend to be much larger, while urban families tend to follow the national average, consisting of 3-4 people ("Venezuela - Agriculture and

Statistics.”, 2016). In prosperous times daily diet consists of three meals a day with staples including corn, rice, plantain, yams, beans and several meats. Potatoes, tomatoes, onions, eggplants, squashes, spinach, zucchini, bananas, mangoes, bread, milk, and sugar are also common in the Venezuelan diet. With the shortage of food staples in super markets, citizens are forced to stand in food lines sometimes for days in order to get rationed food at government subsidized costs, which is never a sufficient amount. Food can otherwise be scavenged, grown, or purchased for soaring prices on the blackmarket. However this is not an option for most as the minimum wage is merely \$12 a month (Gillespie, 2017). Families are feeling the hardship of the food shortage the most, as baby formula is one of the most expensive goods, costing close to one third of a months wage for three days worth, (Drost, 2017). Lack of food has lead to many young children experiencing severe malnutrition, and citizens falling victim to related illnesses.

Education has taken a back seat amidst the crisis with attendance rates dropping because of children standing in food lines, taking care of younger siblings, or being too famished or ill to go to school. 30-40% of teachers cannot come into work because of standing in food lines or caring for their young children and often report students fainting because of hunger in classrooms. Schools are also closed on Fridays and sometimes forced to close due to power outages. Most hospitals have run out of antibiotics and can only treat the most basic of ailments. The government’s tight control on medication coming into the country has led to the creation of underground pharmacies. These pharmacies receive donations from various sources and release their stocks on Twitter for people to request. Most people living in urban areas still have access to water and electricity; however, water quality has decreased and blackouts happen frequently. It is common knowledge in areas like Caracas, now known as the most dangerous city in the world, that going out alone or at night is life threatening (Godfrey, 2017).

Basic education in venezuela is compulsory and free from the ages of 6 to 15, and a 2 year secondary education not required. However nearly half of adults in Venezuela have no secondary education or formal schooling. It is common for upper middle class and upper class parents to send their children to private primary(elementary) and secondary(middle) schools. In the twentieth century modernization and urbanization brought significant improvement in the education system. However economic difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s along with government mismanagement detrimentally damaged the system. Despite Venezuela’s increased education spending in the latter part of the twentieth century, little improvement was seen, as nearly half the money that was allocated was spent on universities. Meanwhile primary and secondary schools suffered from high dropout rates, lack of resources, and poorly trained teachers. Students also received on average only half of the mandated days of instruction due to time lost to strikes and unorganized vacation days (Martz-Heckel, 2018).

In order to assure a stable society and continuation of growth and education of Venezuelan Youth, school feeding programs need to be implemented to encourage school attendance rates, relieve economic hardship on families and ensure the health and well being of the most vulnerable population to famine and disease. Creation of post conflict sustainable agricultural options as well as decreased dependence on oil and an increase in private business ownership should be invested in as well. Approximately 31 million people are short of food, there is an average weight loss of 9kg, and 10 million people skip at least one meal a day, often to help feed their children. Food shortages are felt most in hospitals where malnutrition is climbing sharply and already claiming lives, and at schools where children faint and teachers skip classes to queue for food (Graham-Harrison, 2017).

A free school feeding program could provide a controlled source for Venezuelan youth to attain the

necessary nutrition they need to stay well enough to attend school. Annual dropout rates have doubled since 2011. Classes are understaffed, and over one-quarter of teenagers are not even enrolled in any type of school. Parents estimate that Venezuelan children are missing an average of 40% of class time (Verrill, 2016). Some contributors to this problem other than lack of food is lack of transportation, no school on Fridays, lack of textbooks, and lack of school staff. By providing two meals a day (breakfast and lunch) for students, it will encourage kids to come to school and hopefully raise attendance rates by making school attendance a necessity for survival. Providing free school meals can help support children's education and protect their food security.

A similar program was implemented in schools in Guatemala. According to UNICEF about 50 percent of Guatemalan children graduate from primary school and fewer go on to secondary. Most of the others never enroll or drop out because their parents, often illiterate, need them working in the fields, at home or simply because they can't feed them enough to make it through the school day. The odds of higher education and a professional job are daunting. But Food Aid is working to provide children in some Guatemalan schools with an advantage compared with thousands of fellow children in Guatemala's rural, mostly indigenous and desperately poor communities. Some schools receive food aid from the U.S. government in a simple but effective program aimed at boosting enrollment and attendance with school meals — often the only nutritious meals the kids get in a country with one of the highest hunger rates for children 5 and under in the world. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole "food for education" program tries to address both the hunger and illiteracy problems among Guatemala's children. Authorized by Congress in 2002, it provides agricultural commodities like soy and technical assistance in 27 countries around the world. Its 2014 allocation for Guatemala was \$25 million (Dell'Orto, 2015).

Due to resentment against the US for sanctions against Venezuela, US food aid may be difficult to utilize because of the tight control on any of the countries imports and exports. However if Venezuela were to open up conversations with US food programs such as food for education, McGovern-Dole, and other humanitarian aid groups, a similar goal as to that of efforts in Guatemala could be set. Humanitarian aid aimed at eradicating hunger while boosting attendance and decreasing illiteracy rates could target both the problems of food security and education in Venezuela. A similar program could also be effective as it targets urban areas where most of Venezuela's current population resides, such as in the capital of Caracas. Venezuela's previous education system was both adequate and successful therefore implementing a program to save and reinstate previous methods and values as soon as possible would be easier than introducing an entirely new institution such as in Guatemala. Another benefit would be gaining more access to necessities like soy and technical assistance which Venezuelan schools are in dire need of due to low grain production, low staff, and lack of technology in school buildings. Citizens can also work to spread awareness about preventative healthcare measures and increase awareness of maternal mortality rates and signs of malnutrition in children. Awareness should also be spread about the detrimental effects of purchasing goods from black markets and work toward solidarity in boycotting stolen resources. People can also reach out to family and friends living in rural areas to ensure safety and methods of transportation to and from food lines, work, and hospitals. Another measure some people in more rural areas have taken that has potential for more widespread use is setting up private or community gardens to support local families, churches, and soup kitchens, to grow staples such as bananas, mangoes, and peppers.

By ensuring growth and education, this helps break the cycle of poverty and hunger, helping children become healthy productive adults. Daily school meals allow children to focus on learning rather than hunger, and helps increase enrollment, attendance, cognitive abilities, and graduation rates. School meals also encourage children to stay in school during crises, helping maintain stability, education, and health.

School feeding could also alleviate economic hardship at home because parents are often sacrificing their own food for their child to eat, but if they know their child will receive meals at school, they will be able to feed themselves and keep their own health, allowing them to work. Free school meals can also help with violence and lack of focus in older children in high school. This would also allow teachers to come to school because they know that they and their child can be fed there.

Food shortages have directly affected child malnutrition which has gone from 3% to as high as 13% in some parts of Venezuela. Over 300,000 children are estimated to be at risk of death from malnutrition, according to Caritas, a humanitarian organization run by the Catholic Church (Avendaño, 2017). Malnutrition has the highest mortality rate among children and has long-lasting physical and physiologic effects, including increased susceptibility to fat accumulation in the central region of the body, lower resting and postprandial energy expenditure, lower fat oxidation, insulin resistance in adulthood, dyslipidemia, hypertension, acute stunting, and a reduced capacity for manual work, among other impairments (Leos-Urbel, 2011). In the Ministry of Health's 2015 annual report, the mortality rate for children under 4 weeks old had increased a hundredfold, from 0.02% in 2012 to just over 2%. They then showed that 11,446 children under the age of 1 had died in 2016, a 30% increase in one year, with maternal mortality rising to 65% (Kohut, 2017). It is unknown exactly how many thousands of children have died from malnutrition and starvation because the government has tried to block doctors from recording severe malnutrition as cause of death.

A major contributing problem is the method of food distribution in Venezuela. Since most of what people can afford is government subsidised, the shipments from the government are what citizens depend on. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro gave the military complete control of the food supply after people began protesting over food rationing; however, large amounts of goods are taken by military personnel who sell it on the blackmarket for much higher prices. One way to supply Venezuelan public schools with enough food for school meals is to impose greater surveillance on shipments of food, potentially by INTERPOL forces or through digital systems such as surveillance cameras on food trucks. Harsher punishments should also be enforced to those who steal before goods even make it to the public. This way the near 60% that is stolen before being stocked in supermarkets can be recovered and a portion sent to schools. Small scale military forces should also be provided to large public schools to ensure the safety of children attending, and oversee the proper use and distribution of provided foods.

Under the rule of former President Hugo Chavez, most of Venezuelan farm land was nationalized, or expropriated, along with with food processors, stores, and millions of acres of farms and ranches. Thus, giving the government the ability to control the countries agriculture, a plan originally created to help the poor. These lands have since been neglected and agricultural availability has decreased rapidly. However amidst the food shortages, rural residents are resorting to growing their own food, including crops easily grown such as bananas and mangos. One land reform that can take place to help bring food to schools is to redistribute lands close to schools back to education providers. If farms are set up solely for the purpose of bringing food to schools, unused farm lands can again be cultivated. Even with local farmers earning small wages, the government's redirecting of funds for public schools to farms would not only provide jobs and support rural economies, but help end hunger and malnutrition for children through a sustainable program.

Another potential solution would be to start supplying some of the largest public schools in most populated areas with humanitarian aid. Programs such as UNICEF, World Food Program, Food for Progress, and McGovern-Dole are all potential aids that could invest in feeding Venezuela's youth in

schools. Organizations like UNICEF are successful in working to save and protect the world's most vulnerable children, providing healthcare, nutrition, immunization, access to safe water, sanitation, basic education, rights, protections, and emergency relief. This is in large part due to their ability to work in cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations (UNICEF 2018). Other organizations battling hunger like the McGovern-Dole Program is more specific in reducing hunger and improving literacy and primary education by means of providing school meals. They also provide teacher training and related support in hopes of boosting school enrollment and academic performance. The program also concentrates on improving children's health and their learning capacity before they enter the classroom by offering nutrition programs infants, toddlers, and pregnant and nursing women (McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program, 2018). UNICEF has already shown some interest in aiding children and teenagers after President Maduro opened dialogue with them, finally admitting a need for humanitarian aid. "UNICEF shares the concerns demonstrated by national authorities of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and relevant social sectors about the consequences of the current circumstances for children and adolescents in the country," UNICEF added. "UNICEF joins the U.N. Secretary General's call for a dialogue between the sectors able to bring meaningful and practical solutions to society, and welcomes the integration of new actors to facilitate such a process." (Pestano, 2016). One downside of getting humanitarian aid is the Venezuelan school system becoming dependant on it. There is also the potential danger that as more food goes into schools, looters might become desperate enough to break in, endangering the lives of children. However as a short term option to instate a program of school feeding that will encourage children back into school, humanitarian aid can relieve stress on the government and heavily populated public schools.

President Nicolas Maduro has long been in denial over venezuela hyperinflation, expressing sentiments of loyalty to the socialist regime of prior president Hugo Chavez. However President Maduro has recently announced a series of economic reforms which in his hopes, will contribute to stabilising the national currency. It also aims to build international reserves, as well as stimulate the country's productive apparatus. The measures also point towards a further opening of the fixed exchange rate system, which has existed episodically since 1983 in Venezuela. The first of the economic measures he announced is further postponement and modification of the planned monetary reconversion, which will replace the Strong Bolivar (BsF) with what will be known as the Sovereign Bolivar (BsS). The president also declared that the currency will be anchored in a new cryptocurrency called the Petro, whose value is linked in itself to the price of Venezuelan oil. However, critics of Maduro's have doubted the effectiveness of these measures, suggesting that it will only work if accompanied by other inflation-tackling policies (Dobson, 2018).

Malnutrition effects on children in Venezuela is not only jeopardizing their futures, but their long-term health and their lives. The food shortages force children to stand in food lines, work at young ages, or renders them too famished or ill to attend school. One approach to effectively reduce malnutrition and loss of education during Venezuela's current economic and humanitarian crisis would be to provide free school meals for children who attend Venezuelan public school. This would be beneficial by providing children with adequate amounts of nutritious food and encouraging school attendance. This would also alleviate economic hardships on parents by allowing them to feed themselves and earn money going to work, knowing their children will be fed. This program could be supplemented by redirecting a portion of the government provided subsidized goods that are often stolen by military forces to schools to be prepared and served to students. Local and small scale farmers could also provide food for school meals through cultivation of expropriated lands. Taking these steps along with combined government and international humanitarian aid can provide a successful solution to high rates of potentially deadly malnutrition among Venezuelan children and ensure continued education.

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