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Sierra Leone, Malnutrition

Sierra Leone is one of many countries along the west coast of Africa. In terms of geography, it is placed between Liberia and Guinea and borders the Atlantic Ocean. Sierra Leone is a coastal country with over 400 kilometers of coastline. Sierra Leone is just a little bit smaller in both water and land mass as South Carolina but has a population in between Washington's 6.8 million and Virginia's 8 million. More than 50% of the land in Sierra Leone is agricultural land, however less than 3% of that land is populated with permanent crops. The climate there is tropical and hot but also humid, meaning that the air likely feels sticky often times. From May to December, it rains very often but in the other months, it is a dry season.

The population in Sierra Leone is a total of 6,312,212 as of 2018. About 60% of that population is under the age of 25 years old. This means that Sierra Leone has one of the largest youth populations in the world, all while having one of the smallest total populations in the world. Around 35.7% of the population lives in the urban area, most likely all in the nation's capital of Freetown. Another large part of the population are residents of the rural area of Sierra Leone.

Most of the people from Sierra Leone are descendants of freed Jamaican slaves who were settled in the capital, Freetown. Most Sierra Leoneans speak English; the vernacular in the south is the Mende. In the north, the vernacular that is very common and popular is the Temne. For all the different ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, only less than 1% are refugees and immigrants. Over 60% of Sierra Leoneans are Mende and Temne people. Over 99% of the people there are either Muslim or Christian. Basically, the people of Sierra Leone are all very different and have unique backgrounds, all living in one small country.

During the Sierra Leone Civil War, almost half of the country's population was displaced and/or sought refuge in a neighboring country. On the flip side, many Liberians fled to Sierra Leone during the Liberian Civil Wars and have stayed. The civil war in Sierra Leone just recently ended in the year 2002 so they are just starting to recover from all of the deaths and setbacks caused by the war. One of the major drawbacks that was caused by the war is the malnutrition crisis.

Malnutrition is "the lack of sufficient nutrients." In Sierra Leone, a country with a population close to that of the state of Virginia, the rate of child deaths due to malnutrition is one of the highest in the world. (*Healthline*).

Malnutrition heavily affects the rural population more so than the urban population. Presently, many Sierra Leoneans that are malnourished receive little to no aid from the government, as they are focused more so on recovering the nation from their recent civil war. Most of the aid that the malnourished population does receive is from outside organizations. Still however, the amount of funds that these organizations have are limited (except for organizations such as the World Food Programme who receives upwards of \$7 billion a year). Through the World Food Programme, Sierra Leone is receiving help with providing food to school districts that are in dire need of help. By doing this, schools' retention rates are increasing, as well as their enrollment rates. Also, the program provides HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis patients with foods that are high in nutrients that they lack due to their diseases. (*World Food Programme, 2018*).

The malnutrition crisis in Sierra Leone is at an all time high. People are dying everyday due to this devastating epidemic. While many things are improving, chronic malnutrition is still high. Chronic malnutrition causes stunting, or the prevention of normal growth. When kids and children develop chronic malnutrition within the first two years of their life, the effect (stunting) is irreversible. As terrible as this is, there are ways to prevent this horrible disease and setback.

In Sierra Leone, many people eat the same thing all the time in most urban areas. The average and one of the most common dishes in Sierra Leone is cassava bread and okra stew. While these meals contain both meat, vegetables, and a starch, it lacks in two food groups. There is no fruit and there is no dairy. People do not receive the full necessary nutrients that they need from this meal. (

One of many solutions to help improve the malnutrition crisis in Sierra Leone is to provide children and other malnourished people with supplement vitamins. These vitamins would provide a relatively sufficient amount of nutrients for those that severely lack them. Such vitamins often times cost a hefty amount of money but with help from the United Nations, the cost of the vitamins could become extremely low or non existent at all. These vitamins are a simple, easy, and efficient way to increase the amount of nutrients that people receive in Sierra Leone. One vitamin that children severely lack in Sierra Leone is iron, which is highly prevalent in biofortified green beans. Foods that are biofortified are genetically modified to have more nutrients in it (*World Health Organization*).

Many times, malnutrition in the children of Sierra Leone starts at birth. Most mothers do not breastfeed and because of this, their children suffer. They do not receive the proper nutrients that most newborn babies should receive. From there, the process of chronic malnutrition begins. The mothers supplement the breast milk with water, which is very low in the necessary nutrients that a newborn child needs to correctly function and grow. The main nutrients that babies lack when they are not breastfed is Vitamin A. This vitamin helps people build up and strengthen their immune system. Lacking vitamin A is like not eating breakfast; it has lasting effects on the body. (*Borgen Project, 2017*)

By simply breastfeeding their child, a mother can eliminate malnutrition from affecting her own flesh and blood. In Sierra Leone, a total of only 8% of newborn babies are breastfed. If only that extremely measly and low number was increased by just the slightest amount, a major number of malnourished children and newborn babies would decrease. (*Project Borgen, 2017*).

Another solution that could help improve the malnutrition crisis and epidemic in Sierra Leone is the continuation of the Farmers Field Schools. This program teaches farmers not only how to grow crops, but also how to crops that are nutritionally beneficial to its consumers. Many farmers have been having a truly difficult time producing crops that their consumers could even eat. However, through this program, the productivity from the farmers and their crops have improved. Also through this program, farmers have found ways and received help on transporting their crops to market places to sell, without the crops going bad en route to the market. (*Global Alliance For Improved Nutrition, 2014*)

One of the best and probably most beneficial solutions to malnourishment in Sierra Leone is the creation of support groups. Often times, many parents are too embarrassed to admit that their child is

malnourished that they do not seek help and in consequence, their child dies. These support groups allow the parents to feel comfortable enough about the situation to have open conversations about it and talk to each other about their experiences. This helps the parents learn from others about the crisis and maybe find ways on their own to prevent it. These support groups allow open communication for parents with malnourished children to feel a little less embarrassed and learn about the situation.

Many organizations have stepped up and made it their duty to help eliminate the malnutrition crisis in Sierra Leone. The World Food Programme is largely financed by Japan and they have built centers in Sierra Leone that have been able to reach over 50,000 children and teens who are suffering. Other organizations such as WHO and UNICEF have built centers and supplementary programs that accept children who are extremely underweight. This is a solution that benefits not only the children but also the parents. At these centers, parents are taught about health and nutrition. Many myths about foods such as milk and eggs are disproved at these educational centers. With these programs, it would help if the word got out more about them. They have a heavy presence in the country but not many people attend these food centers and programs because of the small amount of time they can. Also, the programs are not in very convenient locations for people to get to. Building more locations near communities would be a good solution. (*Borgen Project, 2017*)

For many families in Sierra Leone, especially in rural areas, simply learning and being educated about malnutrition helps prevent malnourishment all across the nation. Learning that breast milk is not actually bad but it is highly beneficial for babies is the start to eliminating malnutrition. Also, by teaching farmers better ways to grow their crops and more efficient ways to sell them without the crops going bad or getting spoiled, many consumers can receive proper nutrients that were previously not available to them. This also helps better use the large amount of agricultural land area that is available for crop growth in Sierra Leone. The best solutions to use to fight against malnutrition in Sierra Leone is truly just education about the issue.

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