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Afghanistan, Factor 16: Education

### **Afghanistan: Learning to Feed**

For the majority of Americans our most asked questions when it comes to food are: where will we eat dinner tonight? Or what should I pick up at the grocery store? Or maybe even how many calories is this? Unbeknownst to the fortunate ones there are some drastically different questions being asked around the world when it comes to food. When you closely examine the differences between these questions you are forced to face the facts. About 805 million people globally, do not consume enough food to live a complete and healthy life (World Food Programme. Web). It's an overwhelming statistic, which causes one to wonder - what we could do to help? If you isolate locations and issues in a country one need at a time you can address their individual problems and begin to find a solution to world hunger. Afghanistan is a prime example of a nation plagued with food insecurity. There are many factors that can affect a population's ability to secure a healthy and sustainable food source, but when looking at Afghanistan specifically, the heart of the problem can be narrowed to the lack of investment and accessibility to education.

Before focusing on those two major issues, it is important to gain an understanding of the Afghanistan people themselves. Afghanistan is known to be a patriarchal society. A family in Afghanistan is usually made up of elders: a grandfather or father, as well as at least one wife, although men are allowed to marry up to four. Those couples produce typically four or more children. Extended family may be also living with them; in fact, many generations can populate one home at a time. (Afghanistan-Culture. Web). At mealtimes a typical family would be found eating a meal of rice, vegetables, lamb meat, Naan (a long thin piece of wheat bread), and some tea to drink. However, some of these foods are luxuries and families often make do with small provisions of whatever they can find. (Food in Afghanistan. Web). More often than not those provisions are not enough or nutritious enough to do any good, leaving the many children within those families with their growth stunted. "After the age of two years, stunting is largely irreversible, and has an impact on growth and development and cognitive function," said Carrie Morrison, a representative from the World Food Programme (World Food Programme. Web).

The state of education in Afghanistan is currently in ruins. Afghanistan features the largest amount of illiterate citizens in all of Asia. It is expected that a student goes to school for at least six years, but oftentimes those six years are cut short or are interrupted due to the necessity for young people to help provide for their families instead. Females and males are held in schools separately. If the student is lucky enough they can continue from their primary education to another six years of secondary education. However, a teacher that begins with 58 pupils per class during primary education only has 28 pupils per class during secondary education. (Encyclopedia. Web).

Lack of funding for proper health care and not enough resources has resulted in Afghanistan having one of the lowest life expectancy rates in the world. Afghanistan is also home to the highest infant and under-five mortality percentages (Humanitarian Health Action. Web). Only about 40 percent of children receive vaccinations, thus resulting in 50,000 deaths each year that could have been prevented by vaccines for diseases like malaria and tuberculosis. With the rise in drug use in the country HIV/AIDS is quickly becoming a widespread concern as well.

Another terrifying statistic about malnourishment in Afghanistan is that half of the children under the age of five experience chronic malnutrition. When children experience chronic malnutrition things go bad very quickly. A child is most vulnerable within the first two years of their lives. During those two years, if not fed properly or adequately they can be left impaired. This malnutrition stems from families lack of

funds to purchase healthy foods with and/or lack of healthcare. With a population that possesses a large quantity of young people it's scary to think that so many children are not properly taken care of, due to the extreme amount of poverty that Afghanistan has.

The people of Afghanistan rely heavily on agriculture. According to USAID 60 percent of them use agriculture as a way of a living or just to provide enough food for their families (Agriculture. Web). A government estimate states that about 42 per cent of the entire population lives below the poverty line. The poorest of the poor tend to be found in rural areas with about 45 percent. Families located within rural areas oftentimes cannot support their families by farming alone. Agriculture is a staple in Afghanistan's way of living and supporting themselves, however those located in rural areas have a very small amount of arable land and too few of resources to sustain a livelihood with farming. Instead, they often raise livestock and sell manual labor. (Rural Poverty Portal. Web).

Farmers only have about 15 percent of Afghanistan's total land available to farm on, with the majority of that farmland requiring irrigation. Over two-thirds of land needs some type of irrigation. One of the only ways to get the necessary water to crops is to transport it from bodies of water to farms through tunnels also referred to as karezes (Agriculture. Web). Some of Afghanistan's main crops are wheat, corn, barley, and rice. Sheep and goats make up the largest amount of livestock that are raised and sold in Afghanistan. Besides the use of cultivating land for providing food, copious amounts of opium and hash are produced. (Afghanistan. Web).

Alarmingly, one-third of Afghanistan's population is food insecure, with an additional 14 percent labeled as borderline food insecure (World Food Programme. Web.), with a total population of 30.6 million people (World Factbook.Web.) that means about 10 million people lack the proper food intake necessary to be fully nourished and also experience disrupted eating patterns (USDA. Web). These numbers are extremely severe, as these numbers represent people, people who are malnourished and are unable to reach their full potential to live a healthy and successful life.

The ability to read and write is something that can unlock a world of opportunity for people. Likewise, being illiterate leads to a lot of closed doors. Ninety percent of women in Afghanistan along with 63 percent of men are unable to read and write. (Rural Poverty Portal. Web). Families in rural Afghanistan villages are unable to support themselves as easily, as they are hindered by the illiteracy that plagues their lives. Without an education family members would be unable to go and find work elsewhere or get employment, leading to a low income that stunts the purchasing of adequate amounts of food.

Afghanistan's people do not choose to live this way, but are forced to because they simply do not have the means to support themselves or access to education. Several barriers contribute to this, besides incredibly high illiteracy rates and a major lack of educational opportunities; they face several other challenges as well. Some other factors must also be dealt with in order to lower the amount of food insecurity citizens' face. Afghanistan will have to attend to many causes of food insecurity. Afghanistan faces turmoil from wars and conflict, and will have to bring that to a halt in order for family members to be in safe enough environments to live and prosper. Afghanistan's harsh terrain will also have to be managed. The issue of gender inequality will also have to improve. Women must be held as highly and treated fairly as most of widowed women and women without families are unable to keep themselves fed, due to Afghanistan's harsh views on women in society.

As mentioned before, 90 percent of women are illiterate. There are also at least one million widowers, and 90 percent of those widowers have four or more children to support. Due to Afghanistan's views on women in society these women are unable to receive help and support from their communities. Seeking employment is also impossible, because attaining jobs without the ability to read or write is often

unattainable, leading to mothers and their children on the streets as beggars, unable to feed themselves and their children (World Food Program. Web).

A female is still only expected to partake in seven years of school compared to 11 years for males (Central Intelligence Agency. Web). Since 2001, 80 percent of schools were closed and the number of qualified teachers decreased by 50 percent, leading to the overall enrollment of students to drop by 30 percent. These statistics do not provide much hope for the state of literacy for an average family living in Afghanistan. Even though some reconstruction and help is being provided by several organizations the fact remains that a third of the population is food insecure and there is a direct relation between illiteracy rates, being in poverty, and being hungry.

Investing in education would help to improve the quality of jobs and amount of income for struggling and malnourished families. Educating farmers and non-farmers would implement the use of more efficient tools when it comes to farming and feeding their families. Education correlates strongly with having a more stable environment politically and economically. Authority trends show in the numbers that a higher democratic index and better economic performance is directly influenced by amounts of education, which is exemplified in Afghanistan's past (Political Trends. Web). Women would benefit immensely with more education, as women are still treated as the lesser gender in Afghanistan society. Education would give those women struggling to feed themselves and their children the tools necessary to grow and produce their own food and the information it takes to attain a job that keeps their family financially stable.

This dire situation must be dealt with to improve the education situation in Afghanistan, and in turn help to end food insecurity. Since 2001 when intense fighting began in Afghanistan, it suddenly became the main focus of Afghanistan citizens and the importance of education dwindled. With appropriate placement of schools, which citizens of rural and urban Afghanistan can access freely, you can then increase the number of educated people who can then go out into the world and attain jobs. This will provide for them and their future families. Investments must also be made in educating rural people struggling to feed their families about effective methods to farm their land, and thus provide enough food for their family.

Before Afghanistan will see benefits from more education some major barriers will have to be overcome. In the last decade Afghanistan has experienced major transformations. These transformations have left Afghanistan's government corrupt and weak. It's also left Afghanistan with a large dependency on foreign aid. Foreign aid can only do so much before their country must learn how to be self-sustaining like they once were. Another challenge is that if access to public schools is not available students simply will not go. Distance can be dangerous, especially for young women, and those living in extremely dangerous areas (Afghanistan. Web). So it's crucial that access to education is widespread and easily available. All of these things must be dealt with all while remaining respectful of Afghanistan's culture and values.

Besides investing in and building schools it would make a major difference if those supportive of more educational opportunities formed together to create pressure groups and/or non-governmental organizations whose focus would be on creating more funding and positive legislation for education. Change begins within the people and if Afghanistan had a strong group focused on changes in education, positive changes might come easier and sooner. Currently there aren't any pressure groups formed by citizens of Afghanistan focused on education so implementing one could move Afghanistan in the right direction (The World Factbook. Web).

You might be wondering how exactly improving the education sector itself will do any good for food insecurity. But you see, it's a substantial part of the foundation of a better fed society. Providing food to those in need through foreign aid gives them nothing to work with in the future. It does nothing to placate the hungry stomachs when food from foreign aid runs out. But if you were to teach those citizens how to

properly grow their own foods, or teach them other skills that they can then get a job with, or even just teach them what foods they need to provide the proper nutrition for themselves education can go a long way.

Now those providing foreign aid are doing so much for the communities in Afghanistan that need it, whether by handing out nutritious meals or working to build new schools, and provide trained teachers. If only we could build a bridge between the two and show that being educated can not only make you smarter but you help to become a person that can fight hunger. Each person that's given an education, can then become a successful person on their own and turn around to help those around them, before you know it we will have a society made up of educated people who can not only provide for themselves, but can help those who are struggling as well.

Currently, the World Food Programme is working to end hunger by providing high- protein foods to those in need during the winter (Growing Hunger. Web). An effective way to build upon the foundation of this crucial service to those in need in Afghanistan would be including free, educational programs that provide citizens with basic courses about health, as well as courses on how to effectively farm on the harsh terrain and then yield the best crop. As well as providing the food they need to survive, they can work towards providing people the education they need that, so one day they won't have to rely on others to feed them.

Not only has the World Food Programme worked to better the situation in Afghanistan so has USAID. With their help they've added 13,000 schools and trained 186,000 teachers, boosting enrollment in Afghanistan schools by 56 percent (Education. Web). Their sole focus is to improve the state of education in Afghanistan, so that it can maintain itself on its own eventually. They cite that it's very important that education be addressed now, because Afghanistan is home to one of the youngest populations in the world. Their main obstacle is providing the adequate supplies and the schools in the right areas. If schools are placed too far away from a child's home they are much less likely to attend, so they work to create community based schools (Education. Web).

However, some of those in Afghanistan do not feel that education is a necessity and thus they act angrily towards these improvements. The Ministry of Education reported that about 100 education personnel were killed in 2013, as well as several other incidents involving bombing and other threats. Some of these incidents were connected to the Taliban (Afghanistan. Web). These evil actions show that those that are a part of the reconstruction of education must remain vigilant and well informed. Dealing with these dangers is no easy task, but it's still important that we keep on fighting to improve the state of education in Afghanistan.

The lack of investment and accessibility to education directly correlates with food insecurity among the citizens of Afghanistan. The key to keeping as many people fed and healthy is giving those people the tools, the education, they need to support themselves. If the government of Afghanistan places an importance on education, people in poverty can then use the knowledge they gained to better their worlds. Education is key in order to provide those with nothing, something. Something they can get a job with, and then use that money to purchase food, something that they can take to their rural homes and successfully grow their own nourishment, something that will provide a stable future for every person on this planet.

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