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## How Economics Can Solve the Problem of Malnutrition in Niger

Africa is the continent that has been left behind in this era of globalization. Fourteen of the fifteen countries with the lowest GDP per capita in the world are located in Africa (UNstats.com). This situation leads to many different and potentially devastating problems relating to poverty. Many African countries are worse off than others because of their geographical location such as the countries in the Sub-Saharan region. The countries located in the Sub-Saharan region are far less able to produce agricultural goods as compared to the countries located in the southern region with all of its grassy plains. The Sub-Saharan countries have very little rain and a lack of irrigation. This leads to an insufficient amount of water to properly grow crops. In addition to climate problems, most African countries are at a disadvantage because they have been oppressed for nearly five hundred years. "Three centuries of slave trade, from around 1500 to the early 1800s, were followed by a century of brutal colonial rule" (Sachs 189). Jeffery D. Sachs is a world-renowned economist who has helped countries such as Bolivia and Poland escape economic crises. He is also one of the world's leading economists in terms of support and organization of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. This colonial era put all of Africa at a major disadvantage because of what was left when colonialism ended. Not only did the Europeans take most of the useful natural resources they also left Africa with a major lack of human capital because their people had been oppressed for so long. This oppression created a lack of desire for education and fewer good schools. Borders to the countries were drawn up according to kingdoms that had existed prior to colonial rule. These borders were arbitrary and left some countries with plentiful natural resources and others with none. These dividing lines also broke up ethnic groups that had long been together and caused strife within countries for control. For example, France left one country nearly uninhabitable and with very little access to water due to the nearby Sahara desert. This abandoned nation was the country of Niger.

Niger is a landlocked country half of which is in the Sahara desert. This leaves a very arid atmosphere that is not ideal for anything to live, much less a country whose economy is based solely on farming. When the French left Niger they, like almost all imperialists, left no plan for a country. As a consequence of this, Niger started out centuries behind the rest of the world. Few Nigerians had any education at all. Most of the governmental institutions and the people who ran them left with the French; in other words, they took the money and the knowledge of how economics work. This great divide between itself and the rest of the world left Niger in a hopeless state of poverty and debt. The debt was created by the government trying to be helpful by supporting the people. In reality they had very little idea about how economics work. The problems seemed overwhelming for anyone to solve. Currently, the United States and other western nations are sending money over through different agencies such as the World Bank and other various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but most of the money is being funneled out through many corrupt networks and government officials that seem unable to control. Today Niger is not only faced with an AIDS epidemic, but also a struggle against malnutrition that kills one out of every four children. Not much in the way of financial aid is able to enter Niger through the government; officials either take it for themselves or refuse to accept it. With all of these roadblocks is there any hope for countries like Niger who seem trapped in a cycle of doom? The answer is yes and through the principles of economics this problem can be addressed.

Corruption of the government is the main roadblock in the way of economic recovery for some countries, and Niger is no exception. In a report from the BBC News, “Mr. Tandja said the idea of a famine was being exploited for political and economic gain by opposition parties and United Nations aid agencies” (Plaut 1). This shows that the famine does not affect high-ranking government officials. “Aid agencies report that hunger is killing children every day” (BBC News). This epidemic of malnutrition only affects the poor agricultural workers who have had their crops die. The problem for these farmers is that, even in perfect weather for the farms, they barely produce enough output to get by. This past year locusts came and destroyed most of the crops. This left many of the farming families to starve. Another issue is that in Niger, the poorer a family is, the more children they have. Statistics show nearly a linear relationship; more poverty means more children. The adults believe that having more children will create more people to work and therefore support the family. But in reality it means that there are more mouths to feed with less food to go around. This is scarcity in the most literal interpretation of the word. These families and nations like Niger need help in allocating these scarce resources. Countries with problems like Niger need to learn basic economic policies about how to satisfy basic needs with limited resources. Reformed economic policies that eliminate hunger and poverty are in order for Niger. Should more developed countries (MDCs) give a portion of their incomes to end poverty and starvation in other parts of the world? There is a plan that has been designed for accomplishing this feat.

Niger is not alone in the problems that it faces. However, today it is in the middle of a horrible famine that could have been prevented with the help that nations like the United States offer. The first step that MDCs must take is that they must dive in headfirst and attack the problem with a plan and some guidelines. The United Nations has set up eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that they hope by 2025 will raise the standard of living for the entire Earth. These eight goals are: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, ensure environmental sustainability, and develop a global partnership for development (Sachs 211-213). These goals have been set as framework for MDCs creating the guidelines showing exactly what they can do to help these countries in crisis. The MDGs will ensure that all MDCs willing and able to participate will do so at the same time. This will remove some of the risk involved and may make MDCs more willing to help if they know that there will be assistance from other countries.

The plan begins with convincing the governments receiving aid that the international community is not trying to take over; they are just providing temporary help. Convincing the local populations that this is true will be a feat in and of itself because the governments have brainwashed the populous into thinking that the United States and other developed nations are evil. The governments tell their people this so that they will remain subdued and not try to rise up against the government in hopes of creating the next America. The policies that need to be used are simple yet always more difficult with a country that is so far into debt. To correct malnutrition MDCs need to increase Niger’s production of goods, buy these goods and distribute them to Niger’s people. In this way, the money stays within the country rather than just having the United States subsidized them by sending food, like corn. Giving them food from MDCs is only a temporary solution because when the next famine comes, the American corn will be gone but the African farmers will be no better of then they were before. If MDCs invest in Niger’s economy, by buying their corn, the profits will stay there and allow for improvements that will help farmers grow more corn. The money that the United States sends into Niger will increase the demand, raise the price and give the farmers the return on the investment that they need to increase efficiency and productivity. This will raise the price to the point where the United States and other MDCs will have to buy food for the starving people but it will give farmers enough

money to produce more in the future. They will be able to avoid drought through better irrigation systems and the farmers will be able to purchase insecticides to prevent the locusts from running crops again. Also MDCs would not have to give away food, but instead the food could be an incentive for women to work and for children to go to school developing human capital. If the people do certain things, they get food. This incentive would cause the nation to grow.

Entire books have been written on the subject of ways to end poverty and malnutrition. Most of these are just ways that MDCs could end poverty but they really do not give it their full attention. Jeffrey Sachs recently wrote a book titled The End of Poverty. This book gives reasonable suggestions about how MDCs can end poverty and malnutrition in less developed countries (LDCs) and areas such as Africa. The economics concepts rest in the ideas that MDCs have to make sure that the money that they are providing go directly to the planned location and not into corruption or other drains. “The poor countries must take ending poverty seriously, and will have to devote a greater share of their national resources to cutting poverty rather than to war, corruption, and political infighting” (Sachs 267). But this is just part of the issue. The LDCs need to get serious about the problem but MDCs must also contribute. “The rich countries will need to move beyond the platitudes of helping the poor, and follow through on their repeated promises to deliver more help” (Sachs 267). The economic concepts needed to fight back are outlined above. The farmers in Niger are more or less a perfectly competitive market. In perfect competition the products are homogeneous, the information is perfect and there are no barriers to entry or exit. More farmers will enter the market realizing that there is profit to be had. This will in turn create more employed people who are making a living for themselves. With more people employed in the agricultural sector there will be more food and less of a chance for a famine because of the increased productivity of the farmers. Of course this requires a much greater portion of the MDCs income, all the way up to .7% of the MDCs GDP. The MDCs will have to support this industry until it stabilizes which may take ten to twenty years.

The people who have the most problems with this plan are the farmers in MDCs whose goods are no longer being bought and shipped over to Africa. This seems like a minor blow for the greater good. Farmers in America who produce corn are being subsidized. These subsidies would need to be cut so that African farmers could have a fair chance in the global market. This might cause a backlash from American farmers causing them to consider under-producing to drive up the prices and to spite the government. American farmers understand economics. However, if American farmers decide did this, African corn would be the best value and regular citizens might start to buy it, skyrocketing the demand and increasing income. African farmers could invest into research and development, which would lead to innovations that allow more efficient production in their fragile environment. If some farmers developed more efficient methods to create larger yields, then the market would shift from a perfectly competitive market to a monopolistic competition market. This change would be made because the innovations that were made by farmers who have been investing in research and development would create barriers to entry. A major requirement for perfect competition to occur is no barriers to entry or exit. This chain of events is the way that the market normally works in rich, developed countries such as America to avoid scarcity.

Ending corruption will be the most difficult thing for a LDC to accomplish. This is because the people who are gaining from the corruption are usually the people who have a voice in the society. Naturally, these people don't want to end corruption because they are getting a windfall of profits from the incoming money that is supposed to be aid (Political Cartoon in Appendix). Niger is no exception to this situation. Their ruler is apparently unable to see the trouble that his country is in. “[Mr. Tandja] accepted there were food shortages in some areas after poor rains and locust invasions but said this was not unusual for his country” (Plaut 1). As

stated earlier he denied that there was any famine at all. When in fact, “up to three million of Niger’s 12 million population are suffering food shortages” (Plaut 2). If NGOs are able to get the money into the market in places such as Niger then the climb out of poverty will begin for these countries. If the country ascends to a more stable culture the government will benefit from higher tax revenues and the inhabitants of its country will be living better.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the role of women in Niger. Basically, they are not allowed to do anything but produce a family. Women are not even allowed to support their children if their father dies of a disease such as AIDS. This situation takes away almost half of the work force that could be used to do smaller jobs that do not involve large amounts of manual labor. Although agriculture is going to be a major factor in countries like Niger escaping poverty, there will always be room for more people to work in other positions. If women were allowed to economically advance, then more people would be available to produce food and less children would die of malnutrition and starvation. The government in Niger is only hurting itself economically by barring the women from working and cutting almost half of the potential human capital off. Also if the women were working, it is likely that they would have less children and therefore less money required to feed them. Change is necessary in today’s world. If the government and leadership of Niger refuses change it will never escape the poverty trap.

Malnutrition and starvation in Niger is overwhelmingly widespread. Preventative measures are not being taken by the government. Apparently, the government is the most corrupt; it is only trying to maintain its power and not worrying about the welfare of the people. Thankfully, the government in Niger is beginning to let food and nutritional consumables in to help curb malnutrition. One of these nutritional supplements is a seemingly “magic” paste called Plumpy’nut. “Badly malnourished babies can gain one to two pounds in a week eating Plumpy’nut” (Wines 1). Andre Briend who was initially looking for a type of candy bar that would provide the desired benefits invented this paste. This substance may be a source of ending malnutrition, but the only way to end malnutrition totally is to improve Niger’s economic standing and make them able to support themselves. Therefore Plumpy’nut is only a short run solution. True economic recovery, with the assistance from MDCs, is the long term answer.

One of the economic dilemmas is that MDCs do not want to gamble their money on such unstable economies. The only way to get these nations to go all in is to hedge as much risk as possible. This is the reason that all of the African governments are studied under a microscope, especially the countries where change is beginning to happen such as Sudan, Niger and Rwanda. When the MDCs know as much as possible about the situation they will become more willing to participate. The more information that MDCs have, the less risk that is involved. The risk of failure can be eliminated and this will allow the economic policies to be better thought out with fewer flaws. This is a good thing when there are billions of dollars at stake that might be invested into a country such as Niger. The truth is that nations care about their money and they wish to see that their investment will get good returns. The worst thing that could happen is for Niger to go back into the poverty trap.

One specific thing that will destroy newly developing countries is debt. This process of helping will make these developing countries billions of dollars in debt to other countries. As much as people don’t want to hear this, especially people at the IMF, it is a good idea to eliminate the debt for these countries. The crushing weight of the debt on a country that is trying to stand up for the first time will break their weak legs and send them back down into severe poverty and malnutrition. Debt elimination is the only answer to this problem. Debt elimination worked in Bolivia to help bring that country out of poverty in regards to the hyperinflation that had occurred there in the mid 1980s (Sachs 101). It worked to let Bolivia return to the world market, it will

work on Niger also. With Niger receiving so much in foreign aid the interest on their debt would be huge. Without these payments it would allow the government to concentrate on what it should be doing, helping the people.

Economic policy changes are absolutely necessary to eliminate malnutrition in Niger and other African nations. The government's inability to properly run their government is a main factor in leading to malnutrition. Even though these African countries started out far behind Westerners, they can make it out of poverty. It is difficult to grow crops successfully in this region of the world, but new technologies and advances in science make it possible. With the correct financial backing and proper governmental decisions Niger and other LDCs will be able to pull themselves up from poverty and end malnutrition once and for all. The plan that this essay presents is a very real idea that some very major economists, such as Jeffery Sachs have been advocating. All it will take is for one LDC, Niger for example, to take the steps necessary to end poverty and malnutrition in their own country and provide an example for the rest of the impoverished LDCs. This plan will require major funding and commitment from all the MDCs and inhabitants of these nations. But the goal of ending malnutrition and starvation would be worth the effort and the challenges. Imagine future generations looking back and saying, "Hey Grandpa, what's malnutrition?" This is the ultimate goal and it is attainable if both MDCs and LDCs follow are willing to take the challenge. Good economic practices can help to lead to the end of poverty and malnutrition, not just in Niger, but also throughout the entire Earth.

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