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Sierra Leone: Conflict Diamonds, Civil War, Corrupt Government, and other Economic Barriers

As it stands, the United States is consistently one of the most powerful nations on the planet. On the Human Development Index, it ranks 4th out of almost 200 countries. The average life expectancy for both sexes is 78.5 years, a fine life for any person and far above the average life expectancy for the world. Everything, as it seems, is fine with the United States. However, there is “another side” to the seemingly perfect conditions of the country. According to the website Bread for the World, we live in the world’s wealthiest nation, but 15.1% of Americans live in poverty. More than 20% of children in the U.S. (that’s 16.2 million children) live in households that struggle to put food on the table, or cannot do it altogether. Most of the United States is food secure, but 49 million Americans suffered from food insecurity in the year 2010. Minorities have it even worse. Twenty five percent of African Americans live under the poverty line, while an even higher percentage of Latinos live under the same conditions. Also, despite the unemployment rate, there are people under the poverty line who have steady jobs, but still do not make enough to support their families. The lack of educational and health resources in the ghettos and the rural surroundings in which most of the poor of America live ensure that most of them will never get the chance to reverse their unfortunate circumstances. More must be done by the government in addition to the middle class and upper class to ensure that in the future, there is no such thing as a poverty line, and that there is no need for a “safety net”. We cannot keep going on with our “business-as-usual” attitude (Bread for the World).

As bad as the poor in America live, there are scores of countries that have it even harder. From Latin and Central America, to Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, millions live under the same conditions as the poor in America, and in most cases, under much worse conditions. Why do we continue to see global poverty at such alarming rates? In a time of international space stations, nanotechnology, and cloning, why do more than 925 million people still live on under \$1.25 a day? (World Bank). Who is responsible for ensuring that millions of children do not die from starvation and disease—the government, foreign aid, and the world? In many developing nations, food has become a weapon to be used to gain political power, to receive foreign aid, and to control its citizens. Simple awareness of global issues is not enough. It is time for all of us to act. It is time for all of us to make a difference—to once and for all make a change so that no more children go to bed at night with hunger pains or suffering from many diseases that have cures.

One developing nation in particular, Sierra Leone, happens to be among the ten least developed nations on the planet, ranking 180th out of 187 countries. Located on the southwestern coast of Africa, Sierra Leone is a country rich in minerals—diamonds, gold, and iron ore. Yet, people live in constant fear of starvation or death from diseases such as AIDS, malaria, and others (Sierra Leone). As opposed to a typical poor family in America, a typical farm family in Sierra Leone hardly has any land to farm. The soil is in poor condition, and farming the rice is sometimes an insurmountable task (Fieldhouse). Even when there is rice to harvest, there is usually hardly enough for the families to subsist. A single mistake can mean the difference between surviving and starving (Why Don’t People Farm The Land?) Getting

sick could also mean starvation, as according to IRIN News, the birds are always looking to take the food the farmers have grown. On average, a person will eat no more than 340 calories a day. To us, that's a sandwich and a small bag of chips (Sierra Leone Food Security).

From an economic standpoint, Sierra Leone has experienced a slight increase in GDP due to new iron ore explorations; however, at the same time, inflation rose to 18.1% in 2011 due to increases in global oil and food prices. Based on projections for increases in exports of minerals and cash crops, inflation is expected to decrease in the coming years as foreign debt stabilizes and the government continues to make improvements in the areas of infrastructure, public health, and education. One area that continues to struggle and keeps Sierra Leone at a disadvantage for stable economic growth is the high rate of unemployment for youths. A youth unemployment rate of 60% is one of the highest in the West African sub-region and there is fear among many that this will once again lead to the same civil strife that decimated the country years ago. (African Economic Outlook). Coupled with the issue of teen unemployment comes a problem that children in my community face: they have nothing to occupy their time. The minds of these teenagers are not fully developed, and they will do anything to occupy their time so long that it entertains them. The teens in Africa, however, may turn to violence, once again possibly leading Sierra Leone down the road to another bloody, decade long civil war.

You might ask why the world has so many people living so humbly, to say the least. The gap in developed nations and developing nations has much to do with trade barriers, and inequalities in food commerce. For example, when the World Trade Organization met in 2001, the governments of developed nations agreed to reform agricultural trade policies in order to give the developing countries like Sierra Leone a chance to grow their economy into one that can be globally competitive. However, a disagreement between the powers that be, namely the United States and the European Union, stalled talks, and soon, nothing was accomplished. Neither power was willing to sacrifice any kind of domestic policy.

At the same time, the developing countries have failed to have a voice in the talks that could potentially save their economies. As a result, African interests are consistently neglected, and Sub Saharan African countries make up the entirety of the bottom of the HDI. To put it lightly, the system set up for agricultural trade is set up for countries like Sierra Leone to lose.

This is terrible news for the nonprofit organizations that try and erase the problems that the developing world faces. More than 75% of the developing world live in rural areas, which leads to most of them becoming small subsistence farmers. This simply means that they farm for a living, as well as to survive. However, if they cannot trade their products on a fair market, then they are simply farming to survive, with no resources to make a decent living on, educational, or employment wise.

The irony in the food trading system is that while agriculture takes up only 2% on average of developed countries' economies, it can take up to 35% of developing countries' economies. While poorer countries put more of their stock into making food for the world, the system is still set up for them to lose. The very people that make the food that Americans eat to survive starve and die at night, not able to even feed their own families.

It seems like the best approach would be to take down the trade barriers that suffocate poorer countries and allow them to trade as they please. America, among other countries, has always been one to promote "free enterprise", yet the trade barriers set upon the developing nations of the world show the contrary.

The first step we must take is to stop the selfishness that keeps us worried solely on our own security. The great Benjamin Franklin said, “They who give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” We are perfectly fine with allowing the developing countries of the world to starve as long as we can still run to the local grocery store and buy our favorite frozen meal to eat in front of the television. It seems ironic that those who are skeptical of helping third world countries are those who use the resources they have the most, but instead of using them for a good purpose, they decide to indulge themselves in social networking, or other things to their own benefit. That complacency is the exact thing that will sustain our problems, at home and abroad. We spread the word, and still, most people see it as a simple afterthought. Despite some of the blame being on the nonprofit organizations as well as the developing countries themselves, we cannot expect for the world to become more balanced economically without compromise from the third world and first world countries.

Major reform on the part of the rich countries of the world is nothing without collaboration and action from the poorer countries of the world. For example, during World War II, America helped Germany move from a war torn and battered country to one on par with the United States. Today, Germany is one of the most thriving countries in the European Union. Their economy is stable, their government is fully democratic, and they are secure, militarily and food wise. According to the U.S. Department of State, foreign aid to the country of Sierra Leone has increased dramatically in the past 5-7 years as companies such as the U.S. oil company Andarko have revealed the possibility of oil deposits off the coast of Sierra Leone and the investment of \$900 million by a Chinese multinational company to build new infrastructure and telecommunication opportunities for the citizens of Sierra Leone is commencing. Investments and aid by governments, corporations, and NGOs is crucial to rebuilding a country so devastated by war and civil strife, and many different avenues of aid and education need to be explored to do so.

The governments of developing policymakers, according to authors Kevin Watkins and Joachim von Braun, have four major priorities. One of them is their own reform of their market and trade policies. Some developing countries have economies based solely on agriculture, which means that more modern aspects of the economy, such as the service sector and technology, do not factor. They cannot be competitive with an agriculture-based economy. That is the quickest way for them to stay in the exact same situation they have been in.

The next priority would be rural development. The poor living in rural parts of the developing world mostly live in huts built by the natural resources that they can find. There is no such thing as real estate. They also have no way of keeping themselves healthy or educated, which leads to the next priority.

Improving access to healthcare, education, and capital is a must. Most of the rural poor work and live out of touch with any kind of medical, educational, and financial resources. They are, essentially, cut off from the world. They live without the correct information to even know how to survive. The largest concern, however, is education. Doctors from different countries come and treat their diseases, when in reality, if the poor had the same kind of educational resources, they would produce their own doctors. In time, they would be able to produce their own lawyers, engineers, teachers, and political leaders. In time, they wouldn't have to rely on foreign aid that most developed nations' citizens pay for with tax money.

The final priority described is developing nations having their own financial institutions in which the poor can “articulate their interests.” Most poor have no way to invest the money they do earn in a profitable

business, and this, in turn, ensures that they stay dependent on federal and foreign aid. The point is to try and keep them on their feet so that they will not have to rely on that aid. The riches of those countries go to other nations to keep their interests in check, and sometimes, and especially in the case of Sierra Leone and the blood diamonds, those interests come at high human cost.

The central problem in the world of agricultural trade, however, is that rich countries spend more on food than they do to help the countries that produce our food. Meanwhile, developing countries constantly pay high tariffs to get their products in, and more than often, they are unsuccessful (Watkins, von Braun).

According to CIA's World Factbook, Sierra Leone is still an extremely poor country, with huge inequality on wealth distribution. The effects of the decade-long civil war hamper stores of mineral, agricultural, and aquatic resources, physical and social infrastructure that the country possesses. Serious social disorders among the many tribal groups exist, and prevalently (Sierra Leone)

The biggest deterrent to aid to the Sierra Leonean economy, however, has been conflict diamonds, popularly known as the blood diamonds. Blood diamonds originated from forces opposed to legitimately and internationally recognized governments, and they are used to fund military force in opposition to those governments.

In Sierra Leone's case, blood diamonds resulted from a decade long civil war. The RUF (Revolutionary United Front) would take slaves to mine the diamonds to fund their military effort to take over the government of Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, most countries caught on to this, and in turn, blood diamonds were practically worthless on the world market. This stifled the Sierra Leonean economy, and still does to this day (Conflict Diamonds).

Other factors also create difficulties for the Sierra Leonean economy. The country's soil as a whole is in poor condition, as I stated earlier. With no good soil, citizens and subsistence farmers are not motivated to do the work. The practices that the Sierra Leoneans use are pitifully outdated as well as inefficient (Why Don't People Farm The Land?). In addition to inefficient farming practices, mostly due to the lack of easily accessible information, a day to malaria to a farmer, or a careless mistake by a farm hand can be the equivalent of a failed harvest, and another difficult year in the making. There is no way that the Sierra Leonean farmers can subsist if they cannot harvest a product to sell on the world market, at the very least feed themselves and their families.

However, there are many other, more visual barriers to the success of Sierra Leone. For example, it may be sad, but true: most of the money we send to Sierra Leone and other developing countries only gets to mid government, and then it runs out. No money ever gets to the individual. This is not like the American welfare system, where the beneficiaries receive their benefits directly. Instead, the citizens of Sierra Leone have to hope that their government will not fail them, which brings me to my next point. They have to vote. Sierra Leone is now a democracy, for the most part. Unfortunately, they have some of the same problems that Americans have: they are often too lazy to vote, or they do not realize the consequences of their decision not to vote. They will never dig themselves out of this hole if they do not realize that soon. Sure, they may not have the money to invest in education and healthcare. But the general information of the public is another story. In my opinion, third world governments should make it enough money to at least educate their public on how to stay healthy, clean, and safe, despite their conditions.

Although minimal, America and Sierra Leone have had success with each other. For example, the government of Sierra Leone now has a bank account in the Bank of America as a tax-exempt organization. Put simply, any donations to the account in the amount of over \$250 are not to be taxed. This is microfinance on a microscopic scale, but it is a step forward in helping the country pull itself up. Notice the lack of throwing money at them in hopes that a miracle will happen and that they will just magically erase their hunger problems. There is no commercial to advertise this in a nonprofit organization. According to authors Phil Smith and Eric Thurman, “Traditional charity programs, while providing short term relief, often perpetuate the problems they are trying to alleviate.” It sounds ironic, but the practice described is like a band-aid for a bullet wound. It may mask the problem, but it does not get to the root of it. There are no personal stories of programs that have helped to pull someone out of poverty in Sierra Leone. However, I am hoping that there will be some in the future, as long as we take the correct approach to the situation.

With that being said, another advantageous approach would be to encourage more innovation in terms of solutions on the part of the developed as well as the developing nations of the world. Developed nations have donated billions of dollars in foreign aid to third world countries, but there is a possibility that just like traditional charity programs, foreign aid alone may be causing more problems than it solves. Rich countries need to open their markets to the products of developing nations. It is the only way that their poor can have a chance to dig themselves out of the hole of poverty. Countries like Great Britain and the United States levy high tariffs onto their importers, and as a result, developing countries are forced to compete with first world nations, something they should not have to do. They, referring to the developed countries, also need to inform their citizens of the sheer difficulty that developing nations endure. We as Americans buy clothes, ignorant of the fact that an eight-year-old Indian girl in a sweatshop could have sewed the ten-dollar t-shirt we just bought. Ignorance may be bliss, but this story does not have a happy ending. Allowing half of the world to starve with no hope of finding a way to stability is a recipe for disaster.

As I stated earlier, developing countries do have an obligation to try and solve their own problems before they can be solved by a foreign power. More money must go to education of infants and toddlers, as well as youth, adults, and the elderly. Healthcare must become a major priority. There is no way that a country can go on to prosper while its people are being picked off by diseases that are treatable and/or curable in developed nations. There may be barriers to this kind of change, but those barriers simply must be overcome. Information on how to survive must become first priority as well. Most people live on what they grow—sustenance farming is all they know. Unfortunately, sustenance farming depends on too many outside factors to be a steady income, no less a meal on the table. They need to be able to have a backup plan aside from agriculture. Whether it be designing their own products, or doing something of service to someone else that is willing to pay for it, they need a more stable way to survive.

Ultimately, as citizens of the most prosperous nation on the planet, we must be active participants in the struggle to end world hunger. It is imperative that we take advantage of the resources that we have as citizens of the richest nation on the planet and take action. As educated young people, we have more of a voice than anyone in this nation we call home. In a few short years, we will be graduating college, ready to make a difference. Most of us will go on to develop the newest supercomputer, or genetically engineer the world’s smartest human. The rural poor of the world, however, are starving now. Who is to say that the children of the third world countries don’t have that kind of potential? A few years won’t matter to a

starving five year old, or a twelve year old having to provide for his or her siblings because the deadly disease called AIDS has killed off their parents. Despite how well we think we are progressing, there are others who will never know the blessings that we, as the developed world, have. We need to keep in mind that there is something in this world that is bigger than ourselves. And most of all, we need to keep the words of the late, great Martin Luther King, Jr. in our hearts and minds; “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

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