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Ethiopia, Malnutrition

Malnutrition in Ethiopia

Malnutrition is defined as a “lack of proper nutrition, caused by not having enough to eat, not eating enough of the right things, or being unable to use the food that one does eat,” (Oxford Dictionary). In Ethiopia, malnutrition is a grim, everyday reality for hundreds of thousands of children. About 28% of children, approximately 300,000 children, die from malnutrition every year. Lack of access to education, nutritional foods, and sanitation are all factors of the malnutrition crisis in Ethiopia. Parents are faced with difficult daily decisions just to make ends meet. These include marrying daughters off, sending children to work for people, and keeping children home from school to work at home. No child should have to face these dire circumstances just to survive and no parent should have to give their child up to make ends meet.

Ethiopia is the second most populated country in Africa and one of the oldest countries in the world. It has an estimated population of 112.1 million and is at least 2,000 years old — the oldest independent country in Africa. Ethiopia was never colonized and Ethiopians take great pride in this fact. They see their culture as untouched by the outside world and celebrate their heritage and culture greatly. Life for many Ethiopians, though, is hard, crowded, and unclean. Women tend to marry young and rarely divorce as divorce is considered dishonorable in the Ethiopian culture. Moreover, “there is a high prevalence of physical, sexual and mental abuse among married, widowed, divorced and single women and among children” (Women’s Health, 2020). In rural parts of Ethiopia, families include six or more children, two parents, and live in “mud houses that have cracked walls, leaking roofs, and dirt floors” (Where we build - Ethiopia, 2021). Sometimes, rural and urban homes are made of scrap metal pieces haphazardly assembled, which hold a family unit and extended family. These homes often do not have adequate space for the families that they contain, therefore children and women commonly sleep on floors. Furthermore, Ethiopian homes may be infested with rats and lack toilet facilities, resulting in unsanitary homes and neighborhoods. This is the prevailing way of life for Ethiopian children who are malnourished.

Women and children are also prone to malnutrition due to a lack of education and job opportunities. Women tend to have lower educational levels than men, leaving them unable to support their families. Those with a higher education struggle to find employment as jobs are granted to men over women. This discourages women from attaining an education and encourages dropping out. Women are also likely to drop out of school due to family duties, devaluation of a girl’s education, and being married at a young age for her family’s monetary gain. Often malnourished, these young women have low birth weight babies or die while giving birth. And abused women are also more likely to be starved as a form of punishment, resulting in malnutrition and death. This harsh cycle, faced by many, needs to be broken if malnourishment is to cease.

Many Ethiopians also are not raised in clean homes and neighborhoods. “Only 17% of Ethiopians practice improved hygiene behaviours and live in healthy environments” (Unicef - Ethiopia, 2021). This means that 83% of Ethiopians live in unclean environments and lack healthy hygiene habits. Unsanitary conditions bring about diarrhea which, coupled with little access to food, causes malnutrition or exacerbated malnutrition, and a loss of essential vitamins that cannot readily be replaced. This loss can be “detrimental to childhood growth and cognitive development” (CDC, 2015) and can lead to death. Unsanitary conditions also contribute to poor food storage and germ-laden or spoiled food. Moreover, unclean living conditions combined with lack of clean water results in dying animals and contaminated crops. This reduction in the number of cattle and crops also prompts malnutrition through a decrease in income, food, or both. Without sanitary environments, Ethiopians are likely to be faced with food shortages, and thus, become malnourished.

Access to nutritional foods is also a factor. The Ethiopian economy relies heavily upon agriculture which creates vulnerability to climate-related shocks. Kiremt rains feed about 83% of the population and when these rains do not arrive, or are less than normal, many cannot keep their cattle and crops alive. This begins a drought season which decreases income for food and nutritional food access. Refugees entering Ethiopia from other countries also puts pressure on the limited food supply. And, with over eighty different ethnic groups, Ethiopia is also prone to ethnic conflicts which causes an unstable country politically, environmentally, and economically. A corrupt government makes the situation even worse. The Tigray ethnic group, a minority, has been able to exert power over the government allowing everything to fall in their favor. This benefits a select portion of the Tigray people and deprives remaining Ethiopians from accessing quality food. Though these situations are dire, people are finding solutions.

The Japan International Cooperation has partnered with the Ethiopian government since 2011 to “strengthen mathematics and science education in Ethiopia” (Borgen Project, 2017). This has led to improvements in the educational system, evidenced by increases in student-centered classroom settings, student participation, and science and math achievement. Similar to JICA, the WFP in partnership with UNCF (United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Food Programme) have been working with the Ethiopian government to help students improve in the education sector. They accomplish this by providing meals for 500,000 students, thus improving focus in the classroom due to improved nutrition. When students focus better in the classroom they are able to perform better on school work and assessments. With food provided, students are also ensured that they will not have to leave school to help provide food for the family at home by working. These two groups have worked closely with the government to change education in Ethiopia so that children have a way to provide for themselves in the future. This allows them to come out of their poverty and to break the harsh cycle of malnutrition in Ethiopia.

Action Against Hunger is also helping fight malnutrition in Ethiopia. They have reached 608,051 people by Nutrition and Health Programs and 138,340 people by Food Security and Livelihood Programs. Just this past year Action Against Hunger acted against emergencies by integrating multi-sectoral assistance including: malnutrition treatment, mental health support, WASH services, gender and protection programs, support for food security and emergency livelihoods, and resilience-building activities (ACF, Africa). They’ve also prevented, detected, and treated malnourished refugees in the regions of Ethiopia, reduced anemia through a pilot project called Toddler Care Group, provided emergency cash transfers to 47,965 people, built and rehabilitated 37 water points, distributed 112,516 hygiene kits, reached 21,284 mothers and infants in educated sessions, and provided mental health support to 143,000 people. For more than forty years they have led a global movement that aims to end life-threatening hunger for good within their lifetimes (ACF, About Us).

Water.org is also helping Ethiopians by providing clean water leading to better sanitation in Ethiopian communities and homes. Starting in 2004, they partnered with regional organizations and reached 180,000 people with cleaner water and sanitation access. To date, they have reached more than 256,000 people with sanitation access and cleaner water in Ethiopia. In 2015, they began partnering with the government to provide loans for Ethiopians to install water faucets in their homes; faucets which led to clean food, clean equipment, and clean hands, thereby improving sanitation and health. With running water in a home, foods can be stored in cleaner areas, foods are less likely to spoil or become contaminated. Water.org has transformed lives and is making malnourishment a thing of the past for many Ethiopians.

Since the founding of these organizations stunting has decreased by 20%, the number of underweight children has decreased by 17%, and wasting has decreased by 2%. Not only have these organizations helped to decrease malnutrition in Ethiopia but have also encouraged me to take a step forward to help my country. I now see visions of using the land my family owns in Ethiopia to help feed and educate Ethiopians. I plan to build facilities on the land that can be used to educate Ethiopians on how to properly raise and store food. Ethiopians would be able to take seeds back to their homes to grow and also any plants they raised at the facilities while they were being trained.

There of course would be the concern of how Ethiopians would reach the facilities since many Ethiopians rely on walking on their feet to get to places and how my family's piece of land is located more out in the country than near where people live. Since American dollars are worth more in Ethiopia I also plan to use American dollars to help buy transportation and pay drivers to help get Ethiopians to and from the facilities. This way, Ethiopians can reach the facilities, receive the proper training, and get back home. I also want to integrate new technologies and old technologies to preserve culture and tradition while also helping Ethiopians to produce more food. There of course is the matter of the financial needs of a project of this size and how that money would be raised. Besides putting in the money from myself and my family, there would also be the raising of funds online and through social media. As I continue to learn and grow, so do my plans for defeating malnutrition in Ethiopia and I cannot wait for the day of the manifestation of my plans.

Action Against Hunger, Water.org, JICA, and WFP are all working to stop malnutrition in Ethiopia by recognizing and repairing the underlying causes, by creating access to education, nutritional foods, and sanitation. They are providing food and clean water, but also ensuring people understand how to take care of themselves. They are essentially, "teaching a man to fish to feed him for a lifetime" (Isabella, Mrs. Dymond), yet giving the tools where most sorely needed: to women and children. These four humanitarian organizations are teaching Ethiopians classroom subjects, such as math and science, to obtain higher-paying, future jobs, and skills, such as financial management and communication, to allow Ethiopians to run businesses effectively and save money efficiently. These precious resources are sustainable, hence, Ethiopians will benefit from them for the rest of their lives, ensuring that no generation is malnourished. Not only are these organizations making a change, but so are young Ethiopians. Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans like me are making plans and thinking about the future of our country and how we can help to build a better Ethiopia in the future. Fighting malnutrition and educating Ethiopians is our top priority and with leaders in the field like these organizations, the foundation of the base is there. Organizations like Action Against Hunger, Water.org, JICA, and WFP and Ethiopians alike are coming together to help defeat malnutrition in a sustainable and effective way in Ethiopia and are helping build the better future that Ethiopia and the world needs.

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