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Agriculture in Development: Food Security in an Era of Increased Demand – Republic of Yemen

Introduction

When people hear of the Middle East, Yemen probably isn't the first country that comes to mind, but it needs be. Thirty six percent of their entire population is undernourished. That's not to say that the rest of them are well off either. Over forty percent of their 9.7 million people are forced to live on less than two dollars a day. To make matters even worse, Somali refugees have been illegally entering the country since a civil war broke out almost twenty years ago. The number of refugees has been recorded as high as one hundred thousand. The coast guard authorities are not able to control all of the outlets through which they are entering. Once the Somali refugees arrive, the Yemini government has to pay for their medical examinations to ensure that they do not carry infectious diseases, which is costly. This is a growing problem for Yemen's economy.

Yemen was once called "Arabia Felix", or land of prosperity and happiness. From what was described above, doesn't it sound like just the opposite? It is the most distinctive country on the Arabian Peninsula, and not because of its high poverty levels. Visitors to this beautiful country are taken aback by the lush green valleys and rugged mountains that don't seem to fit in with the surrounding desert landscape. Despite modern developments, ancient traditions still thrive in this very distinct culture. Perhaps the most stunning sight is the minaret of the Great Mosque. Even the houses aren't simple. Intricate, geometric patterns are painted in various colors on every surface. Even with such a high level of poverty, Yemenis still manage to keep their age-old culture alive.

Family Farm

Yemen is the most populated area on the Arabian Peninsula. The majority of Yemenis live in small villages, while the other 23 percent live in cities or towns. The population is growing at a rate of 3.46 percent each year. After arranged marriages, children are considered a gift from God. A Yemeni's allegiance is first to his/her family, and then to their society. Responsibilities are shared among neighbors, relatives, and friends. They never have to worry about being lonely because many relatives live in the same house together. Each family member has a special role according to their age and gender. Most of the time, authority is based on seniority. The elderly's opinions are highly valued, and they are often asked to mediate in disputes. The father is the head of the household, while the mother raises the children and takes care of household chores. Men usually assume tasks that require contact with the public.

The average income per capita is estimated at 820 dollars per year. The World Bank reports that each person spends an average of 219 dollars a year on household consumption. Chicken and lamb are consumed more often than beef because of the price difference. Dairy products are not very common except for buttermilk, which is consumed daily. Flat bread is a popular bread that can be baked at home. Although coffee is cultivated in the region, most prefer black tea. Before the 1960s, very few could afford education. Children are schooled in the village mosque where the emphasis is memorizing the Koran instead of learning to read and write. Many children remain illiterate. Currently, everyone has access to a free elementary education. Children attend school from ages 6 to 15, and some attend secondary school until the age of 18. For the minority who choose to pursue a higher education, there are

several modern universities and vocational training centers. There is a significant gap in the literacy between males and females. Seventy percent of men fifteen years of age and older can read and write compared to a mere thirty percent of women. Although this gap has gotten smaller, it is still a problem.

Agriculture is the primary occupation of 60 percent of the population. Households farm small plots of land, where not much can be produced. Yemen was once very self-sufficient food wise, but now is dependent upon imports. One of the contributors to this is that qat, a plant whose leaves are chewed for a stimulating effect, is being grown at the expense of crops. In rural villages having a large family is encouraged because there are more people to help with the daily chores of a subsistence farm. The average rural family has seven children. Typical crops grown on family farms are grains (sorghum, corn, wheat, barley, millet) vegetables (radishes, onions, beans, lentils, leeks) fruits (mangoes, bananas, apricots, grapes) and qat, tobacco, and cotton. They use modern irrigation techniques, which provide a production level high enough to almost meet demand for the crops that they cultivate. Livestock are also bred for milk, meat, wool, hides, and eggs. Once a week the men attend the market, or suq. Anything from fruit to televisions are for sale there. The biggest barrier for agriculture is the amount of available land on which to farm. Only about 25 percent of the land is good for growing crops. Traditionally, Yemen was famous for its coffee. Now its biggest cash crop is qat.

Urban families are employed in trade, commerce, or manufacturing. City people are said to be weaker and less healthy by the rural folks, while they consider rural people to be less sophisticated. City habits are changing for the Yemenis. They have a tradition of folk medicine. They use herbal remedies to cure sicknesses. Doctors have been working to create modern health services, but it is a tough job. The people are scattered in small villages and there aren't enough doctors available. The shortage of drinking water and poor sanitation contributes to diseases. Urban Yemenis live in what are known as tower houses. They are similar to modern apartment complexes. Certain communal areas are shared, but each family has its own story or unit. Men are also starting to wear non-traditional clothing, like suits and ties. Human relationships are very important in Yemen. In the city life is less personal, but they still find time to socialize. Yemeni men conduct business in a different manner than most urban Westerners. They always have time set aside to discuss family news, and deadlines are always flexible. There are two barriers why urban families do not obtain as much nutritious food. Since crops are cultivated by the rural farmers, it is hard to get the food from the villages to the cities. It is also tough to keep the food fresh for a long enough period of time for it to be transported to the city.

Key Factor

Providing access to finance; improving infrastructure and institutions for marketing products; and addressing problems created by globalization and trade policies for subsistence family farmers

Since not very much of Yemen's land is arable, not many subsistence farming families have access to rich soil. Although the water supply is very inconsistent, farmers have developed some of the most sophisticated methods of water conservation found anywhere in the world. This makes their wide variety of crops possible. Even with that, most families are not able to grow enough food for themselves, and must rely on imports. Since they rarely produce extra food, exporting is not an option in return, providing no solid income. Without money, they aren't able to buy enough food for their family. This is where poverty begins.

Yemen's banking system is very poor and has a number of problems including a poor loan collection record, low bank monetary assets, and questionable policies regarding the extension of loans to clients. To this day it continues to suffer from poor enforcement and compliance, a weak judicial system to ensure collection, and a general lack of trust in the banking system. The value of their currency, the Yemeni riyal, changes depending on supply and demand, not the government. About twenty five percent of the population lives below the poverty level, and this number is increasing. More than half of their

small income is spent on food and beverages. The mortality rate is high, and fifty percent of the population is below the age of fifteen. The trends for this factor are measured by overall scope, distribution, and underlying causes. From 1998 to 2005 the percentage of people living in poverty has decreased from 40.13 percent to 34.78. Poverty is more common in the urban areas of Yemen than in the rural parts. Expenditure distribution is unequal; urban areas have a high of 41 percent compared to 31.6 percent in rural areas. As far as agriculture is concerned, women are at a disadvantage. When the men of the household leave for higher paying jobs in the cities, women are left to care for the family and farm. They must get up very early, and take care of all the back-breaking chores. Fortunately, several government projects are being formed to help women produce more with less effort; the women will then have more free time to do the things they enjoy.

The people of Yemen entered the twentieth century under a cloud of economic decline. Socialism eventually left the southern economy in ruins. The civil war after the unification in 1990 contributed even more to the economic decline. However, government policies aiming to stabilize the economy in the mid-1990s have drastically improved the country's structural conditions. In the long-term, Yemen is hoping to address the unemployment problem, trying to control the population growth and carrying out the privatization policy, in hopes of making their economy stronger in the future. A lot of political work still needs to be done to achieve social and political stability, especially to soothe tension between the current government and rural tribal groups. The government has yet to lift subsidies on diesel fuel, limit military spending, downsize the public bureaucracy or suppress corruption in its public institutions and ministries. If the Yemen government continues to work at all of their goals, life will look up for the Yemenis.

If Yemen's banking system was stronger, then poverty levels would be lower. People would have a more reliable source to turn to for help getting their own money issues under control. If there isn't a strong banking foundation, how can they be expected to have the skills necessary to take care of their own finances? With more fundamental facilities to help educate them about farming without taking an extensive toll on the environment, the Earth can be saved and people will become educated simultaneously. If they could learn how to make the most of the land they have, more exports could be made, giving them more money for food; therefore, lowering the number of Yemenis living in poverty. Women would also benefit from this. If the men of the households learned more practical ways to farm, they could leave the cities and come back to work on their farms. They could earn more money, and the women would not have the responsibility of running the entire farm. Food also has to be grown for those living in the cities because not everyone in Yemen are farmers. If more exports are made, then more imports can also be made because people will have more money that they are able to spend. More imports would mean that family farmers would not have to sacrifice the food they've grown to feed the people living in urban areas.

Increased Productivity and Yields

If subsistence family farmers were able to increase the rate and amount of the cultivation of their crops, it would help the economy of Yemen. When more food is grown, these families can begin to receive a steady income. With that extra income, they could begin to market their products in better ways. This would improve the livelihoods of subsistence farms because they could all share their ideas and learn from each other the ways to make their farms more successful. As time goes on, they would become more and more advanced in their farming techniques. This would not only benefit farmers, but urban families as well. If they did not have to worry as much about how much food they would have on their table each night, they could make more advances in business. Their main focus could be on work instead of worrying about the well-being of their family. These business men could then work on globalization of whatever their business may be.

Recommendations, Suggestions, Conclusion

If subsistence farmers were given a structured plan to follow on how to improve their productivity and yields, everyone would benefit. Part of Yemen's poverty problem could be because they don't quite know how to make it better. If they were assisted in their quest for a poverty-free country, it would help give them the confidence to know that they can accomplish more than they ever thought possible.

The United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees Affairs in Yemen (UNHCR) has already called the international community to support Yemen as they face the increasing amount of African refugees. Each year, Yemen receives anywhere from 12,000 to 14,000 Somali refugees, which is one of the main causes for Yemen's shortage of money. Since Yemen allows these refugees to enter, it sets a good example of how the world should be ready to help others, so we should return the favor and help them in their time of crisis.

Yemen is a name that deserves to be recognized around the world. It is a stunning country with a past, a present, and deserves a better future. Is there any reason why they can't re-claim their title of the "Arabia Felix" or the land of prosperity and happiness?

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