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Malnutrition in Southeast Asia Caused by Tsunami

On December 26, 2004, many countries in Southeast Asia were hit and affected by a tsunami. This tsunami was one of the worst natural disasters ever to happen in Southeast Asia, and people around the world were left speechless. The damage that one tsunami caused is unbelievable.

“The tsunami flooded most of the 200 inhabited islands, destroying homes, health facilities, infrastructure, roads, harbors, and jetties. Water tanks, electricity supplies, and communication networks were simply washed away. On some islands, the devastation is complete—there are no structures left standing, just piles of rubble and debris littered across the island outlining the course of waves.” (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”)

The tsunami not only caused devastation amongst the human population but also severely damaged the ecosystem and its ability to produce food. The food production problem in Southeast Asia contributed to an existing epidemic of malnutrition spreading across the world. Malnutrition is a major concern everywhere across the world. If malnutrition were eliminated or even slightly reduced, the people in the world around us would be much healthier than they are now. “Of the world’s 6 billion people, more than 800 million are unable to obtain the adequate nutritious food needed for sound health and growth. Such undernourishment negatively affects people’s health and productivity” (“Food and Nutrition Programming”). Malnutrition is a disorder all over the world, and now a major concern of citizens of Southeast Asia. Obesity and undernourishment both take a role in malnutrition. However, undernourishment is now the concern of the citizens of Southeast Asia. Many people of Southeast Asia are now victims of undernourishment since the tsunami wiped away much of their food production leaving them without a source of income to provide food for their family. Although this is only a temporary loss of nutrition, the people of Southeast Asia are suffering a great deal of malnutrition. Malnutrition is a major problem in Southeast Asia since the tsunami, but through the help and contribution of many, and with careful planning, a long-term solution to malnutrition can be implemented in Southeast Asia as well as the rest of the world.

Pre-tsunami, an average family in Southeast Asia would eat two snacks and three meals a day, and “typical meals consist of chapatti and tuna for breakfast, and various curries, rice and salads for both lunch and dinner” (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”). The meals that a family would eat before the tsunami would not have caused any form of malnutrition. In fact, the people of Southeast Asia had many sources of food and were generally healthy people. After the tsunami, snacks have been eliminated altogether and fruits, vegetables, meats, and eggs have been greatly reduced due to the tsunami (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”). Obviously, malnutrition is increasing in this region of the world due to the tsunami. Even before the tsunami “dietary diversity [was] poor due to low availability of fruits and vegetables on the island (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”). Nothing but a natural disaster caused the malnutrition and the lack of food in Southeast Asia. How the problem is approached could either make or break this trend in increasing malnutrition in Southeast Asia.

So, how is the government reacting to this problem? Through food aid, Southeast Asia is being helped more and more everyday. “The Government responded to this disaster immediately, providing a free food distribution to all islands within days of the disaster” (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”). Nutritious food such as bread is being provided all throughout Southeast Asia. However, food distribution is not the only need in regions affected by the tsunami. When the tsunami hit, the water also became infected. Water is a necessity of life. A human can only live forty days without food and water. An absence of a proper water supply can also contribute to the malnutrition of the people living

in Southeast Asia. The government also responded quickly to this problem. “[Lampuuk, Aceh] is still today reliant on daily deliveries of water, courtesy of local and international NGOs...This water is purely for cooking and drinking purposes only” (Lipscombe). With very few options, the governments in Southeast Asia continue to try to help people in need with food supply. However, they can only help to a certain extent. Once the government has done all they can, what happens next? It has been said that, “[Sri Lanka’s] already tight food supply situation could worsen further in 2005/06” (“Tsunami Devastates Asian Food Production”). The government may not be able to supply food forever, and agricultural assistance may be required in order to help the farmers get on the right track of producing food once again. “Relief efforts must ensure that local farmers and fisher folk hit by the tsunami receive all the assistance needed to cover their food needs and to restart farming and fishing as soon as possible” (“Tsunami Devastates Asian Food Production”). Although the citizens and governments of Southeast Asia may work hard and create temporary relief efforts, what will happen next? What happens after all the money and food that were a temporary relief are gone?

Millions of jobs were destroyed when the tsunami hit in December leaving families with a problem of finding money to provide food to their family. An average family in Southeast Asia contains about four to five people. “Before the tsunami, [a fisherman] made \$1095 every month” (Lynch). After the tsunami, this same fisherman is left without a job and is relying on financial aid (Lynch). “All of them have lost their jobs...All the fishermen, all the traders, the professionals, the small businessmen,” (Lynch). In some cases, already poverty-stricken families struggle more than ever before because of the loss of their jobs. “The majority of the households were poor even before the Tsunami. According to the survey, almost 80 percent used to spend less than Rs. [Southeast Asia Currency] 10,000 per month or US \$100. For a household with four to five members this means less than a dollar per day/person” (“Tsunami Situation Report”). Suggesting that income is in direct correlation with malnutrition, Dr. Bipin Verma of the World Health Organization states the facts about malnutrition in Southeast Asia.

“The low income and the high food expenditure are clearly associated with the poor diet consumed by the affected people even before the tsunami. Food intake particularly of fish and pulses has decreased considerably since December 26. This puts a large number of households at a high risk of nutrient deficiencies (especially micronutrients), and especially women, as they are usually the first to reduce meals when food is scarce...food access is still a problem for about 600,000 to 650,000 people who lost assets and source incomes.” (“Tsunami Situation Report”)

Obviously, without money, a person will have a hard time surviving. Food is crucial for living, so if one can’t buy food it would be hard to survive unless they had access to agricultural crops or natural water supply, and even those have been washed away and infected. “The tsunami has washed away agricultural crops, seeds, tools, and fertilizers. People are reporting that the soil and water for irrigation are still too salty to begin replanting, even if they had the seeds and tools (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”). The worst part now is that the crops can not be replanted for a while and the crops already on the ground were washed away.

“The 2005 main season paddy maize crops, to be harvested from Malchon were already on the ground when the tsunami struck Sumatra. The island is the second in Indonesia in terms of rice production. Together, the two worst affected provinces account for about 10 percent of the aggregate national rice output in a normal year.” (“Tsunami Affected Countries Face Severe Local Food Security Problems”) The farmers who are now losing money by not being able to produce more food because of the tsunami also lost money by having their already planted crops be washed away. The tsunami not only contributed to malnutrition in Southeast Asia but also that of the rest of the world. People with no source of income to buy food and no agricultural way to produce food will become malnourished. The tsunami meant no jobs for people. No jobs for people meant no source of income for them and their families. No source of income for them and their families meant no source of food. Also, the tsunami wiping away the rice meant no way to provide agricultural means on their own and also took away the jobs of farmers who

provided rice to the rest of the world. Clearly, the tsunami not only affected the malnutrition in one region, but continues to contribute to malnutrition around the world.

Obviously, the people and the governments in Southeast Asia have a major problem on their hands for which they are seeking a long-term solution. In the meanwhile, all the people can rely on is temporary relief. In a report prepared by World Food Programme, they made their suggestion on how Southeast Asia should go about solving their problem.

“During the time it takes for WFP food stocks to arrive in the country, WFP Maldives should assist the Government in targeting food assistance using their own in-country stocks. WFP should then replace these stocks, and furthermore, should give consideration to replacing some of the Government Stocks distributed freely immediately after the tsunami. Given the costs that will be faced in the up-coming reconstruction, the alleviation of funds spent through free food distribution by the Government could then be used and be of benefit to the reconstruction efforts.” (“Rapid Assessment Report of the Impact of Tsunami in the Maldives”) This suggestion by Maldives Rapid Assessment uses government aid to provide food for the citizens until they are back on their feet. Once people can provide for themselves and are no longer in need of food supply, the money once used for food is then used for reconstruction of Southeast Asia. This plan consists of short-term as well as long-term investments and solutions. Malnutrition will be alleviated because families will be given nutritious food through food-aid when food aid would have no longer been provided. When families can provide for themselves once again, and be able to have a balanced nutritious meal like they had before the tsunami, food aid will no longer be provided. Through this process, the citizens of Southeast Asia will be able to eat healthy once again and will once again be employed and be able to provide a balanced meal to their families. Malnutrition will be taken care of if a balanced nutritious meal is obtained.

My suggestion to the problem of malnutrition in the affected countries in Southeast Asia is to provide a certain amount of money from government funds and nonprofit organizations, and businesses to get them back on their feet. This will create employment for people so that they can provide food to their families. As for food supply, the government can only do so much. Mandatory food supply, such as water, should be provided for a certain amount of time for free until the water company is back to purifying water again. As for nutritious food, it should be shipped in and provided for free to the families who are in need the most. After a certain amount of time, it should be provided for a reduced price until the agricultural crops in Southeast Asia are back to producing food. In order to encourage people to eat healthy food, government subsidies should be put in place for the people to buy nutritious foods at a reduced cost while food with little or no nutritious value may not receive the subsidy or even be taxed to help prevent the people from eating junk food obsessively. This will allow good eating habits to become the norm and will discourage the consumption of nonnutritional food. With these suggestions, problems and loopholes are bound to occur. The government may not have enough money to provide to all these funds. Maybe they could provide to only a few companies, but not the whole group of companies. On the other hand, who is to say who needs the most help. There would never be a fair way to go about distributing the money. Although problems may occur, the governments of Southeast Asia do need to map some sort of path of reconstruction, whether they take other peoples’ or other governments’ suggestions or use their own.

Through all the problem fixing and reconstruction in Southeast Asia, one of the main focuses, however, needs to be malnutrition. “Many people are unable to buy food because they have lost their income and livelihoods. And local food production took a hit when boats and fisheries were destroyed and agricultural land flooded,” (Pearson). This is one of the most important problems that exists right now in Southeast Asia. A solution needs to be put into act immediately. Even if employment is not solved, if crops can’t grow for a few years, if nothing can be changed quickly, how are children or adults going to become nourished again? How is the malnourishment problem going to be solved? Well, it can never completely be solved because there will always be people who eat whatever they wish, but what about the people who choose to eat healthy? If they have no money to buy food and no way to agriculturally get a balanced meal,

what happens to them? Government aid should come into place then. Southeast Asia should allow citizens who can prove to the government that they need aid to receive free food through a service similar to food stamps. However, the catch should be that they will have to go to a cafeteria or an organized location such as a soup kitchen to eat the food and they should only be allowed to eat the food that will serve as a beneficiary to them nutritiously. Three nutritious meals should be provided a day so that families will have a balanced nutritional regimen in their daily lives. This will help solve the problem of malnutrition because it will provide well-balanced meals to the people of Southeast Asia who were unable to provide a decent meal to their families due to no or low income. Ultimately, the low income caused malnutrition because families were eating what they had in front of them, not necessarily what was nutritious for them. High demand of food means high prices for food as well for the people of Southeast Asia. As said before, food is in high demand throughout Southeast Asia where the tsunami hit, which means malnutrition is also high in this region as well.

Obviously, malnutrition is a major problem concerning the whole world at this time. No one thing can be pinpointed and blamed for this world-wide epidemic, not even the tsunami. It is said that, "malnutrition is a contributing factor in more than 50 percent of deaths among children under the age five worldwide" ("Food and Nutrition Programming"). The citizens of Southeast Asia are victims among that number. Since the tsunami hit, millions of civilians were left homeless and without a source of income to provide food for their families. This hurt these families because it allows them to become part of the malnourished population across the world. The children who were learning how to eat healthy before now face a problem because they are forced to eat nonnutritiously. It is crucial to children of young ages to learn how to eat proper when they are young so they will have good eating habits all of their lives. The tsunami contributed to the already existing malnutrition problem throughout Southeast Asia. People who could not face the climbing food prices before the tsunami, now face food prices that are twice as high as before, (Lynch). The governments in Southeast Asia are doing all they can. However, the people "will receive food aid only until [the] end of March [2005]" ("Tsunami Situation Report"). Most of that aid is coming from sources other than the governments. This aid is coming from other countries as well. The Southeast Asia governments need to start planning ahead for when that assistance runs out and establish a long-term solution. This long-term solution should consider every aspect of the problem of malnutrition. Food supply is a major step in helping cure malnutrition, but what next? Millions of people were left jobless after the tsunami; therefore, they are without the means to pay for food. Mainly, the food bought for cheap is the food that is not healthy. Families who wish to eat healthy will have to pay a little bit more money for their nutritious well being. This problem should be addressed in any long-term plans made by the governments in Southeast Asia. This is exactly why "the low income and the high food expenditure are clearly associated with the poor diet consumed by the affected people even before the tsunami," ("Tsunami Situation Report"). Relief efforts are being made right now, but only society can change malnutrition for the future. Worldwide efforts must be made to put an end to malnutrition, and they must be made now.

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