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## The Hunger and Obesity of Children in Kenya

Malnutrition is an imbalance, whether it is a deficiency or an excess in the number of dietary elements one receives. Diogenes said, "If a rich man when you will; If a poor man when you can." However, a lack of food is not the only way to starve. One-third of the world's population is short on calories, while two-thirds are lacking in adequate protein. Sadly, many children are undernourished because they are lacking in the nutrients needed for their growth. These children often go hungry or eat meager meals. Many live in poverty in the cities or at their rural homes. Children are limited to what they can and cannot eat by their parent's income. However, in Kenya, hunger is not the only existing problem for children. Obesity has become one. Often times in the cities, there is a thick line of social division between those starving and living in poverty and those who have enough money and are full. Those children, who are living comfortable lives, may be sickly, because they are not receiving the right amount of nutrients. Certain healthful foods should be given to children at different age levels. An infant for instance should be fed breast milk whenever hungry. Toddlers should start eating solid foods. Children age six and up need foods from each of the five food groups daily. Children grow the most in their first five years of life. Unfortunately, this is when many children either receive not enough or too many nutrients. Many children die in the dawn of their life because of not getting enough or having too many nutrients. The health problems related to undernourishment are often easy to cure, but once these problems, such as Marasmus, set in its damage is irreversible. The "western" health problems, heart disease for example, that are related to obesity can be treated. However, they are often ignored or overlooked because there is not enough education to know about them. Fortunately, there is hope. Children in Kenya have the chance to attend elementary school at no cost. Many children are taking this chance, to make their lives better. Children who do not have enough nutrients or who have too many, need to be helped in order for them to live their lives to the fullest.

It does not matter if they are hungry or obese, rich or poor: malnourishment can be a problem. Obesity as well as hunger can slow a country's development. Both hungry and obese mothers curse their children with life-long impairments. As food becomes more abundant, affordable and diverse, the poor often remain undernourished. The wealthy will eat many types of foods, but these foods may have fewer nutrients. As fat and sugar become cheaper, obesity often increases.

There are about thirty-one million people living in Kenya today. The number of children that are hungry has risen within in the past year. More than thirty-six percent of children in Kenya are going hungry. With a population growing about two percent every year, the number of Kenyans who are obese or hungry will continue to rise.

Many rural shambas or small farms raise crops and livestock for substance. Many farmers struggle to gather enough to feed their families. Few farmers grow enough for export. Kenyan farmers will often take up a part-time job in order to help supplement income. Rural farmers depend on each other and their communities for help and support. However, the number of Kenyan farmers is slowly decreasing, because each year many move to the cities to find work. As Kenyans leave their farms and migrate to the cities they live in poverty because jobs are scarce. The traditional life of Kenyans is slowly dieing. Although some change is good, much is bad. As the family ties are broken, divorce occurs. Fifty-five percent of women are forced to head the

households left broken and penniless by their husbands. Many of these households are found in the city slums. These households lack sufficient shelter, food and education. Twenty-five percent of the urban population exists below the poverty line.

Kenyans place great value on a large family. Many families have six or more children. A typical farm mother is kept busy with childcare. She is often forced to take a part-time job working on another farm estate in addition to her own household and farm work. Unlike many developing countries, the Kenyan government encourages women to seek a higher education and higher paying jobs. However, many women have no time to pursue such dreams. The father figure often works the land and a second job. He does not help with the childcare or house work.

Kenya is a low-income, food-deficient country. Forty-three percent of the population lives in unconditional poverty. Many small farmers have an unreliable food security. Corn is the main staple in Kenya. It is made into porridge and mixed with other foods to make a stew. However, farm families often just eat the porridge plain because other foods cannot be obtained.

Although school attendances are not compulsory, many parents encourage their children to go. Elementary school is free for all children, allowing many to attend. In Kenya, Elementary school lasts for eight years. After elementary, school is no longer free and many parents cannot afford to continue sending their children. Almost eighty percent of children have an elementary education.

Unfortunately, in Kenya, as in many other developing countries, children often do not receive the proper nutrients from day to day. A child's diet is limited by their parents' income. Many parents have no concept of what a healthy diet is. Beans, lentils and corn are staples in many Kenyan children's diet. Ugali, a cheap and somewhat nutritious meal is served whenever money can be scrounged up. However, many families live on what they can find or grow. It is hard to find clean water, because good wells are miles from the home. If clean water cannot be afforded in jugs, many Kenyan women and girls will wait in a long line to use the public faucets. However, the water from these faucets is not often clean

The food needs of children are related to their growth and development. It is important that all children, ages six and up get to eat from each of the five food groups everyday. Vegetables provide vitamin A, C, folic acid and minerals. Fruits can provide vitamin A, C and minerals. Dairy will provide protein and calcium for those growing bones. Breads and cereals will provide vitamin B, fiber, and energy from carbohydrates. Dried beans, meats, fish and poultry provide protein, iron and zinc. Clean drinking water is also a necessity. All of these nutrients are to produce healthy child growth. Lacking one or more of these nutrients maybe cause the child to be undernourished.

Malnutrition at an early age will cause life long damage to a child. Defects may develop in the bones and body structure as well as the child's mental condition. Undernourished children remain alive, but are extremely vulnerable to many minor diseases. Death may result not directly because of malnutrition, but because of the complications faced by children after an infection. Many diseases affect children who are undernourished. These diseases may result from lacking only one nutrient. Marasmus occurs in infants who have lacked total caloric intake for a long period. Kwashiorkor is a protein-deficiency that stunts growth. A lack of calcium, phosphorus or vitamin D may cause rickets. However, an incorrect balance of two minerals may also cause rickets to appear. Cretinism originates during pregnancy or early infancy due to a lack of thyroxine, a hormone secreted by the thyroid gland. Cretinism causes defective mental and physical growth. Goiter, also known as big neck, develops from an iodine deficiency, causing the

thyroid gland to enlarge. A deficiency in vitamin A softens the cornea and blindness occurs. A lack of vitamin B<sub>1</sub> or thiamin causes Beriberi. These deficiencies are found in obese child too. Obese children, although they may have as much food as they like, also lack essential nutrients causing these diseases to occur.

Undernourished children are less able to absorb nutrients. This causes the various deficiency diseases that plague children. However, many of these health problems and deficiencies could be avoided. Over ninety-five percent of childhood blindness would be preventable if more vegetables were consumed. Even a simple Vitamin A supplement could help prevent blindness. Thirty-three to forty-three percent of mental retardation brought on by deficiencies could be reversed with a supplementation of iodized salt. The iodized table salt that Americans take for granted could be used to help children become healthier.

Infants need to be held, need to suck and need to learn security and to trust. Many mothers are unable to provide this to an infant born to an impoverished family. Food experiences will help the infant to develop motor skills. Breast-feeding is the best thing a mother can do for her infant, because breast milk is the best source of nutrients and immunoglobins. However, babies who are breast feed often need to eat more often than babies do on formula. Many mothers in Kenya can buy formula at a "cheap price". For the first twelve months of life, it is not recommended to feed a child cow or evaporated milk. Nevertheless, sometimes cow's milk is all the mother is able to afford to give to a child. As children grow older, they have a steadily growing appetite. Children grow the quickest during their first year of life. Solid foods should be introduced when the child is five to six months of age. A child should only start to drink pasteurized milk once age one or two is reached.

Every year twenty million low birth weight (LBW) babies are born to under or over nourished mothers. These babies will face an increased risk of dying before they leave infancy. If the baby can survive hunger in the womb, the health problems they will have as an adult are numerous, if the starved baby can even survive after being born. Many LBW babies have stunted physical and cognitive growth during childhood and a reduced capacity for work. Female LBW babies are likely to give birth to a LBW baby themselves. Neonatal death rate is four times higher when a baby weighs less than two and a half kilograms. The death rate is eighteen times higher if the baby weighs less than two kilograms. Stunting will occur during the first five years of life and the damage done is irreversible. Neonatal disorders and infectious diseases that could have been prevented cause three-fourths of all child deaths. Chronic diseases like heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, which are related to excess nutrition, can also be found in LBW babies. Although undernourishment usually occurs early in life, the risk of obesity, heart disease and diet related diseases usually occurs later in life. These "western problems" are unfortunately becoming more common in Kenya.

Children play a very vital role in helping their families produce enough food and income. However, if those children are significantly under or over weight, their ability to help plummets. If a child is unable to help because of health problems, obtaining more food or dietary supplements becomes even more difficult. This puts a strain on Kenya's economy because they are losing vitality in their workforce to diseases and early deaths.

Children who are under or over nourished, is a huge problem that is happening not only in Kenya, but also around the world. The situation is very severe, because it is a ravenous continuous cycle. A child who grows up under or over nourished will pass eating habits onto other siblings and eventually their own children. As the child becomes a young adult, a male will suffer many health problems along with losing part of his ability to work. The female will lose the

same as the male and give birth to a LBW baby, starting the cycle over again. The cycle causes both the women's and the country's developing economy to suffer. Families are not receiving the necessary amounts of food, which meet the nutrient requirements. The environment may be affected by this because farmers will grow the same crop in the same field year after year. This not only effects the environment, but also biodiversity.

The situation that children are living in today is not improving. If anything, the situation is becoming more dire. To get an indication of the number of children under or over nourished one just has to survey what they eat on a day-to-day basis. Facts tell us that children living in rural situations are often under nourished. Children who live in urban settings are often over nourished except for those children who are living in urban slums. The FAO stated that obesity is not yet as big of a problem as hunger.

Helping children to get food that is more nutritious will help the family gain more food and income. As the child becomes healthier, whether they are under or over nourished, they will be able to help their parents more on the farm. A healthier child can even attend school and get an education to get a good job. A healthier child may help to preserve biodiversity and the environment because they will be able to rotate crops and fields when better educated. A healthier woman will be able to give birth to healthy babies. The women may also be able to get a better education and a good job. Small farmers will be able to grow more crops and reap the benefits of selling their surplus. Kenya's developing economy will benefit from a generation of healthier people as well.

National governments and International organizations can help those children in Kenya who need a nutritious diet. Those organizations can pull together to help teach families about nutrition and what it is to be healthy. I feel that education is the key to begin to fix a problem. Children who are under nourished do not have the money or access to nutritional foods or a balanced diet. International organizations can help by donating money or foods to these families so that they can be on the right track to a good diet. They can also provide education to help those families carry out healthy lives. For those children who are over nourished, the government should help supply education about how to eat healthy. If children were taught how to grow a healthy diet, they could not only start to eat healthy, but also sell their healthy surplus crops. This surplus will supply others with a healthy diet.

My suggestion to the national government and international community would be to work together not against one another when it comes to poverty. Start at the root of the problem with those who are in dire need of help. Once those people are on their feet, they will be able to sustain a life above the poverty line. They will be able to have a better income and eat more nutritiously. Those women and children who were impoverished will able to prosper more and get more out of life. It is time to start genetically engineering more crops that not only produce a high yield and are disease resistant but also more nutritious. Obesity however has to be handled differently than hunger. Cities are where most obesity is found in Kenya. I suggest that the government support science to find ways to fortify food with more nutrients. The government could also support ways to advertise healthy eating habits. Nutrition education could be put into school curriculum. Children will be able to absorb the information and pass it on to their parents. Children gain their eating habits from their parents. If a parent changes their diet, the child will too.

The world produces enough food to ensure that every person can eat healthy and be productive. However, because of an imbalance in the food distribution, eight hundred and fifty-two million people are undernourished and starving, while numerous amounts of people are obese. There are eight hundred and fifteen million people located in developing countries that are

under nourished. Twenty-eight million more under nourished people are in countries that are in economic development transition. In addition, nine million undernourished people are found in developed countries. Undernourishment costs five million children their lives each year. Millions more suffer from sometimes-irreversible deficiency diseases. The message that should be sent to children is to eat healthier, not more food. Obesity is a growing problem among Kenyan children as food becomes more readily available. "Give a man a fish and feed him for day. But, give a man a fishing pole and teach him how to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime." This saying applies to those children living in poverty in Kenya. If one just hand them food, clean water and money one is only helping them get on their feet for a little bit. Instead, if one teaches the children about how to eat healthier and show them which crops are healthier to plant and to eat, this will feed them for a lifetime. The vicious cycle of under and over nourished people needs to end. The circle can be interrupted and it starts with the children. Educating the children about what nutrients they should be getting everyday and showing and helping them, will install into the child's brain how they can help themselves be more prosperous in life. Getting children the supplements that they need to overcome their deficiencies is important too. Because if the child continues to be sickly, even though they are eating healthier, they will not be able absorb the nutrients they need. The children are the key to Kenya's future. Kenya's economy will either prosper or fall. The fate of Kenya is left in the hands of the children. Those children need to learn how to eat healthfully and get all their nutrients, so that few are hungry or obese. It is important to educate Kenyan children about eating healthy now, so that they may have the chance lead full and prosperous lives.

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