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Mexico: A New World of Prosperity Opening Doors Where Hope has been Forgotten

What do you think about when you wake up in the morning? Maybe you wish you had another hour of sleep, or you wonder if there is any hot water left, or you worry about getting to work on time because you have woken up late. These might be typical thoughts of persons who live in developed countries.

Now imagine that you have to wake before the sun rises, completely distraught by thoughts that your four-year-old daughter is struggling with level two malnutrition, but you have no resources to provide for her treatment. You have to worry that your sons, who have left for work in other part of the country (or, for that matter, other countries) are safe. You have wake especially early and wonder if there is enough food to get the breakfast ready. You have to hope that your husband's job will still exist today. You have to consider whether your kids can stay in school, or if they, like many other children, will have to drop out to help earn money for the family. You have to consider where you might leave your children today, since you will have to go find work in the city. You have to worry if your home will survive the next storm, and if it doesn't, where you'll go.

These are some of the varied and severe challenges that face poor Mexicans every day. They face crucial and sometimes deadly decision and situations daily—from the minute they are born until the minute that they die. Comparing these concerns with yours, you might recognize the relative privilege with which people in developed countries live.

One of the most significant, and indeed life-threatening, challenges that face the Mexican poor is malnutrition. In Mexico, whether urban or rural, there are an incredible number of families who are in poverty; as a direct result, many also suffer from malnutrition. Mexico's problems are quite complex, and that makes them hard to address. The middle classes and lower classes in Mexico do not make enough income to create a decent standard of living for their families. If their income and job opportunities were increased, the people would be able to grow and eat sufficient and healthier foods. Because the wealth disparity in Mexico is so drastic, and its roots are so historical, the Mexican government must implement many changes before these opportunities might arise.

Mexico's wealth disparity problem creates a situation in which the rich are *very* rich, and the poor are often *very* poor. Moreover, those who are rich own a large portion of the country's natural resources, thus leaving the poor with inferior opportunities to raise their own food. While upper-class Mexicans enjoy relatively carefree lifestyles, Mexicans in poverty spend their days wondering how they will make it to tomorrow.

For example, upper class Mexicans have the money to buy perishable foods that are necessary for a balanced, healthy diet. They can buy fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy products, and breads, with relative ease. However, this is not the case for most Mexican households. Since the money is certainly not evenly distributed, there are many more impoverished families than there are wealthy families. Approximately 15 percent of Latin America was undernourished in 2000-2002 (United Nations), and many more struggle every day to find enough food to keep themselves in comparative health. Some families live in desperate areas of cities, with limited access to electricity, running water, sewage systems, and—perhaps most importantly—food. These families must depend on local markets for food because they have no land to grow their own. Moreover, they often do not have enough money to feed their

typically large families because the minimum wage—if jobs are even available—is too low to meet the basic standard of living.

Families in the city must depend on jobs within those cities, and most of the time those jobs do not exist; the population of Mexicans who desire work exceeds the number of jobs that are available. When a job *can* be found, many men and women have to anticipate significant travel to go to work. Consequently, they have to use a significant amount of the meager wages that they earn for bus fare or other transportation costs. Besides this financial concern, the long grueling trips for these workers leave little if any daylight for them to tend to their families. Many times, both parents in a family—in addition to some or all of the family's children—work all day leaving the rest of the children in uncertain care. In some cases there are babies in the families; if there is no one to take care of these younger children, the mother may be forced to decide between staying home and caring for the children, or taking them out to work with her.

City-dwelling families sometimes do not have electricity—either because the government has neglected to produce it in that area, or because it is unaffordable. Sewage systems are fairly rare in middle to lower class slums for the same reasons.

Campesino families live in the countryside with small amounts of land. They grow their own food and fetch water from nearby streams. They also may not have electricity, transportation, running water, sewage systems or telephones. However, they sometimes have more food than families that live in the city slums where people must depend on markets for food.

Nevertheless, for campesino families to have any money for clothes, medicines, soap and other food that they cannot produce on their own, they must sell some of their grain at market. They will sell during harvest season in order to buy necessities. The problem that arises in selling part of the harvest is that they might run out of maize and other crops before the next harvest and have to buy it in town. This leaves them without funds for any emergencies that may come up.

Campesino families often have very severe nutrition problems due to parasites in their water. The water quality causes many diarrhea problems and parasitic infections. Due to the nature of their homes, which are often pieced together with pieces of wood, tin, or palm, campesino families are often rather exposed to nature. This exposure to the environment leaves them vulnerable to the elements and causes more colds and diseases.

Upper class citizens do not worry about parasites and diseases because they can afford water filtration systems. Besides, when they do have such health problems, people with sufficient money have no problem getting a doctor to tend to them. They also can pay for any medicine that the doctor prescribes. If they live where there is no hospital, they can pay to take a cab or bus to another town where they, can bribe the nurses to let them be seen first. They can also travel to other countries with better facilities if they cannot cure their disease or sickness at the hospital.

If someone is sick in a middle or lower class family, giving them proper attention from a doctor means waking up before dawn, walking (if the individual is able) many miles, and getting to the clinic when they open their doors at about 8:00 a.m. The nurses usually start to check patients in around 10 a.m. and the doctor may or may not arrive at about 11 a.m. Depending on when a person gets there, he or she may have to wait for everyone else to get done being seen by the doctor. Sometimes he or she can bribe the nurses off for a more favorable position list, but if a person does not have enough money, he or she has no way of doing this. If the doctor finally sees a patient and she prescribes medicine, it is usually provided in the clinic for no extra cost. However, if the medicine is not available, it might have to be bought from a pharmacy, if financially possible. Often, time runs out before all patients can be seen, so

the last patients on the list for the day are told to come back tomorrow. In this situation, that person has to go through the same routine the very next day if the condition needs immediate attention. This is clearly a very time consuming process and it requires at least one day off of work, and money for any medicines. It is hard for any lower or middle class family to deal with that burden.

Physical access to health facilities is equally troubling. Most campesino families do not live anywhere near a hospital. In order to get to a hospital the sick has to be transported into the nearest town. If that town does not have a hospital, a bus ride might be necessary. Sometimes the bus does not come through that day, despite that it is scheduled to do so. If the bus does not come through, those people would have to wait until the next day, and by then it may be too late. If a person *can* get to the hospital, they have to find a way to pay for the hospital bills, which is a special problem considering time spent at the hospital is time spent out of work.

In this case that a person is not seen and must return another day, she might have to find somewhere to stay in lieu of paying another bus fare. By this time, it could be too late to treat the sick person. It is clearly very difficult to get help for even common sicknesses such as diarrhea and level one malnutrition (let alone more severe ailments) so those problems often escalate to the point that children and adults die from sicknesses that have common ailments.

It is obvious that children who are properly nourished are also stronger. They have more energy to work harder and, therefore, to sustain a better living. Even mild forms of nutritional deficiencies can limit a child's mental and physical development in very early adolescence, which can lead to snowballing effects including insufficiencies in school performance. As a result, Mexico's current and future populations could experience even higher school drop out rates and an even higher burden of illiteracy (Feeding Minds). On the other hand, if children are well nourished from the point that they are born, there will be less economic problems like illiteracy and learning disabilities. If poverty can be reduced in Mexico, the country's malnutrition rates will decrease. If Mexicans have the money to provide sufficiently healthy foods, the chance of impediments to mental and physical development will be diminished, thereby creating smarter, stronger citizens

It is apparent that throughout Mexican history, the rich have prevailed. Besides their relative privilege and innumerable assets, they also have the resources to meet and maintain basic needs. The cycle of privilege (or lack thereof) is perpetuated at birth, as children born to wealthy families have access to a balanced diet, which leads to better developed bodies and minds. Later, they grow up to provide the same opportunities to their own children, as well.

It is also apparent that poverty and malnutrition in Mexico likewise exists in a cycle. Without financial resources, families lack the abilities to properly feed their children. Without proper nutrition, many children are forced to either struggle through school or forego it altogether. Without education, many people are unable to find adequate employment opportunities. Without employment opportunities, there are few financial resources. So, without any sort of government intervention the cycle perpetuates itself endlessly.

Mexico has a history of corruption in politics and governmental plans that do not serve the interests of its myriad poor. To improve the nutrition and decrease poverty in Mexico, the government must actively take a number of steps. First and foremost, it must determine how governmental finances may be increased to provide funding for such changes. Further, in order for an intervention program to succeed, the Mexican government must agree that the programs' implementation truly will help. Because other plans to decrease malnutrition in Mexico have failed, many people—especially those in power—doubt the effectiveness of future plans. For example, the government has promised to transfer land to campesinos a number of times, but many land surveyors have been bribed by

large farmers to declare that such land is being used, and is thus unavailable. (Compounding the problem, campesinos have begun to claim their own land in many areas, thus creating further conflict between the landowners and the landless).

There must be a concrete and enforceable plan to transfer unused land into the hands of the people that need it most. In doing so, the government must also provide more regulation of large-scale, factory farmers, who monopolize not only the resources to grow crops, but also the markets in which they are sold. For example, the land that large-scale farmers are not using properly needs to be given to campesinos. Moreover, the government must be willing to extensively finance the costs of these transfers and controls. If subsidies are increased for campesinos, they will have more land and can therefore be productive and Mexico will not have to import as much grain (thus freeing up much needed government funds). To ensure the process is efficient, programming must be provided that will educate campesinos (or new landowners) regarding the land's best use. This programming must teach campesinos how to utilize different land more efficiently. New farmers must understand processes to conserve soil and prevent erosion—and moreover understand that those processes that will eventually lead to better and more plentiful harvests. Land management education will not only help produce more grain, but also improve campesinos' physical welfare.

Education must by no means be limited to subjects involving land use. Better education leads to better understanding of the world in general, increasing problem solving skills, independence and social understanding. Without education for the impoverished, the chance to end the viscous cycle of poverty is very slim. If the impoverished are educated all throughout their high school years, they may develop the skills to become productive workers and critical minds and to further work their way out of poverty.

While proper education may provide more job opportunities for many people, the sheer number of jobs in Mexico must be increased to fully satisfy demands for employment. Again, the government will have to finance job development so that qualified job-seekers may be appreciated in Mexico's economy. If construction subsidies are increased, for example, the unemployed may be able to provide attention to the needs for roads, plumbing, electricity, and other staples in poor areas. Not only will job opportunities for the un-employed rise as a result, standards of living will also increase—thus, the cycle of poverty and malnutrition will slow.

All of these projects are not easy, and demand governmental money and attention that may not currently exist. However, ever-increasing rates of poverty and malnutrition in Mexico indicate that the changes are imperative to the country's survival. Mexico has reached a point at which the cycle that perpetuates poverty (and thus malnutrition) may only be disturbed if the government can muster the strength to intervene. Attention and funding must be given to landownership, education, and employment deficiencies that keep the Mexican poor just that—poor, and to give all Mexicans the opportunities to provide for the health and well-being of themselves and their families. If successful, the decrease or destruction of Mexico's malnutrition dilemma can only naturally follow.

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