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Poverty in Central America and Mexico

According to the World Food Bank, "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Oshaug 2). This means that the food should not only be healthy and sustainable, but it should also meet the requirements of the consumer, such as their cultural preferences. For many of the world's poor, this is out of their reach. In Central America and Mexico, many people are living in poverty. Poverty causes them not to be able to have all of the necessities. While some have enough food to eat, others may not; and even for the ones that do have a sufficient amount of food, it does not always have all of the nutrients that they need. Many people do not have access to safe drinking water either.

Many people living in poverty are considered rural poor. Rural poor may be defined as people who belong to indigenous groups or large families; those who have little or no education and have a limited access to land; and those who are highly vulnerable to increasing rural violence and natural disasters. The largest group of the rural poor is the indigenous peoples; they account for one third of all of the rural poor, and they live in extreme poverty. The rest of the poor are small, subsistence or landless farmers. More than 90% of the rural poor are affected by owning or farming land that is found on mountain slopes, eroding hillsides, or in other similar areas that are not suitable for farming (I.F.A.D.).

Two-thirds of the people in Mexico and Central America live on farms. Most families have five or more children, and in some areas several generations may live together. Families live on small farms on which all of the members of the family help. Many of the farmers do not live on their farms, but rather in small rural villages that are near their fields. The villages they live in are simple, many of them with only one main dirt road. Their houses, most of which are built of wood and covered with dried clay, have one or two rooms. These houses have thatched roofs and dirt floors. They have little or no furniture, and what they do have is simple and homemade. Corn and beans are the most important foods in the peoples' diets (Olmstead 264-268).

Rural families must work on farms or ranches. The families that work on their own farms raise the food they eat. They do not have much money; instead of buying the things they need, they trade for them. The families that work on ranches grow food for other farmers, but the food is too high priced to buy for themselves. They spend over half of their incomes on food alone. Since most of their incomes are spent on food, families do not have the money to improve their living conditions or to improve their farming practices. In 1996, studies showed that in Costa Rica, 25% of the rural population was living in poverty, and another 15% of the population was in poverty due to agricultural related wages. In Central America, approximately 30% of the work force is agricultural related (I.F.A.D.).

In many of these countries, poverty is caused by a lack of education, and in turn, poverty causes a lack of education. While education in most of these countries is free and required by law, many children remain uneducated because of a lack of classrooms and teachers. Because many families are poor, the children must stay home to help their parents farm and cannot go to school. Many times the level of poverty is caused by the education level of the mother. In Central America, the literacy rate for women is lower than that of men, and women play a very key role in rural households. Women support the farm by being employed as seasonal agricultural workers.

Poverty can be caused from ethnic or gender discrimination. It can also be caused by a lack of basic necessities, such as health and housing. With poor social status, those affected by poverty are not able to easily have access to political and economic resources. All of these factors contribute to families being able to earn a sufficient income to buy food.

Today, approximately 17% of the people of the world are undernourished. This is a decline from 1991 when 22% of the population was undernourished. But while overall the percentage of undernourished people in the world is declining, it is actually increasing in some of the Central American countries. Twenty- nine percent of Nicaragua's population is undernourished. Guatemala's percentage increased from 14% in 1991 to 22% in 1998. Honduras also has a very high rate of undernourished people ("Trends and Current Status").

Approximately 5% of the undernourished five year olds in the world live in Central America. In a study conducted in the 1980s, the percent of underweight five year olds living in Central America and Mexico was approximately 12%. The percentage of five year olds that were stunted was 22% and the percentage wasted was 2.7% (de Onis).

Undernutrition in these countries is caused by poverty. Approximately 25% of the population of Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador live on less than one dollar a day, and approximately 15% of the population of Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Panama live on less than one dollar a day. Studies show that 65% of poverty is rural (Richards).

The wealthiest 20% of the population receives 6% of the total income, while the poorest 20% receives only 3% of the income. This means that the richest 20% of the population receives an income that is over thirty times higher than the income that the poorest 20% receive. Poverty, though, is not just physical, it has become a mindset of the people. It dictates their view of themselves, their communities, and their country as a whole. These people have a low self-worth and self-esteem (I.F.A.D.).

In 1980, sixty percent of the population of Central America and Mexico was living in poverty, while 38% was living in extreme poverty. By 1999, these levels had increased to 65% of the population living in poverty and 40% living in extreme poverty. In 2000, these percentages decreased slightly to 64% in poverty and 39% in extreme poverty (I.F.A.D.). From 1980 to 1990, the percentages of those living in poverty increased. The percentages from 1990 to 2000 did decrease, but only slightly. Based on what the current status in Central America and Mexico is today, without aid and guidance, the poverty level will continue to increase. Malnutrition is also increasing. Families need to be able to learn better ways to make money, whether that be through education or advances in agriculture.

By decreasing the poverty level, families would be able to have a better choice in the kinds of foods they eat, or to just have enough to eat in general. By eating enough food or the right kinds of foods, nutrition would increase and dietary diseases would start decreasing. Women would be able to eat better, and in turn, they would have healthier babies. Studies show that babies who are adequately nourished when born are able to learn better in school, are less likely to drop out of school, will be more successful, will increase their lifetime earnings, and are less likely to have nutritional related diseases. Small farmers would be able to improve their farming practices, which would in turn benefit their countries and communities.

Honduras has been able to reduce undernourishment from 31% to 21%. This reduction has been caused by an increase in food production, food imports, and the raising of livestock. By the raising of livestock, the production of corn has almost doubled, and the livestock puts meat into the market for consumers. The country has been able to raise their literacy rate to 70% and has been able to provide safe drinking water to 87% of the population ("Latin America").

I believe that the first step in improving malnutrition is by international organizations continuing to step in and help those who are affected by poverty and hunger; however, they should only need to do this as long as necessary. As the old saying goes, "Give a man a fish- feed him for a day; teach a man to fish- feed him for a lifetime." It should not be the job of the government to feed the people of their nation. Organizations need to be able to come in and teach the people ways to reduce their hunger and poverty. It is the job of the people then to put into practice these ideas so they not only reduce their own poverty, but also help their friends and neighbors reduce their poverty. International organizations need to work with national governments for a common good to help the people. I believe that it is the government's job to be willing to allow organizations to come into their countries to help them, while the organizations need to respect the people and their culture.

One method that has been proven to help prevent parents from not sending their children to school is by offering school provided lunches for the children and also by sending extra food home with them. This offers an incentive for the parents to keep their children in school (Elton). A method that has been proven to help small farmers is large banks offering small loans to individuals to start a business, such as basket weaving or the raising of small animals. By obtaining a loan, many women would be able to make an income to help support their families. Farmers also need a better way to market their crops. Large farms are able to export their crops to other countries. Small farmers need to be able to sell their crops to rich families in cities and therefore be able to make a larger profit (Struble).

I believe that organizations and governments should put a large effort into research. There should be more invested into agricultural research and development, and education. Agriculture is the basis of many developing countries' economies, and therefore, rural development is a crucial part of ending poverty. Farmers need better ways to improve their lands and grow better crops and livestock. More research must be done on education and ways need to be found to improve literacy rates. A way must also be found to educate the children of farmers, who need their children to stay home to help them.

The poor also must be able to have a say in their country's government. Although they may seem helpless or unimportant, they actually know better than anyone else what their needs are. They should be involved in the designing of programs that help them reduce their poverty and malnutrition.

One way to improve the food supply could be by genetically modified crops. By using plant biotechnology, new seed hybrids can be developed that allow for the transfer of one or a few desirable genetic traits in a precise, controlled manner ("Science and Technology"). People will benefit in multiple ways from this with the ability to grow crops that are tastier, have processing advantages, and are nutritionally enhanced. This technology also has benefits in that the new seed hybrids can be developed to meet geographic and climatic conditions. When a new hybrid is introduced, it must meet the cultural needs of the people growing it.

Much can be done to improve poverty and malnutrition in Central America; it simply takes caring people who are willing to use their time, money, and talents to help make a difference in the lives of others. While poverty in these countries is great, it is only a small part of poverty worldwide. If national governments and international organizations would work together, they could do much to improve the poverty level and malnutrition. National governments could also benefit each other. By concentrating less on their differences and their backgrounds, governments could work together for the common good of their own people while helping their neighboring countries by sharing ideas to reduce poverty and malnutrition.

Poverty affects people in many ways, from malnutrition to a low standard of living. By reducing the poverty level, not only would people have more nutritious food, but they would be able to have a

better lifestyle in general. People would be able to get a better education and also attain a higher level of education. Families would be able to have better homes and would be able to get medical attention when needed. Farmers also would be able to start using better farming methods and learn how to improve their land and use it better.

There is a need for agriculture to become more based on the consumer's needs and benefits. This could be accomplished by nutritionists working more closely with agriculturalists. Nutritionalists need to advise countries and the public in general, because as the poverty line decreases and the country develops, there will be a larger demand for food. As the demand for food increases, so will the demand for unhealthy foods; therefore, the more developed a country becomes, the greater the risk its citizens have of developing dietary diseases. Nutrition should be a top priority. When the nutrition level improves, it enables people and their communities to become more developed and reduces poverty. When people are able to be nourished, they are able to learn more and lead better lifestyles.

It is time for people with the knowledge and skill to help poor countries help their people by educating them, helping them use better agricultural techniques, and taking the people of their nation to a higher standard of living. Many groups have tried to end hunger, or at least to reduce it. However, hunger is not just a short term project, or even just a medium one either. Hunger is a long term project, in which countries need permanent ways to reduce poverty and hunger, and take their nations up to higher living standards and be able to keep them there.

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